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# Palestinian Universities Under Occupation, June to August 1986

Penny Johnson \*

At midsummer, only three of the seven major institutions of higher learning in the occupied territories have managed to complete the academic year and hold graduation ceremonies as scheduled. Al-Najah and Hebron universities and Hebron Polytechnic have all extended their academic years into August due to de facto or de jure army closures, strike days, and other delays. But the most serious delay is at Birzeit University, where an open strike declared on 17 June by faculty and employees in response to an ongoing financial crisis is now in its second month.<sup>†</sup>

Graduations did take place at Bethlehem, Abu Dis, and Islamic universities, but their new graduates' hopes for future productiveness and prosperity may soon meet with disappointment as a result of an equally grave crisis. Indeed, as unemployment among university graduates continues to soar and the new graduates join the old in facing an uncertain economic and political future, the universities and research institutes in the occupied territories are beginning to focus on this problem. What they can accomplish will be a measure of the universities' ability to fulfill their educational mandate.

The past few months have also witnessed a series of political develop-

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<sup>†</sup>The strike ended 8 September with an agreement whereby faculty and employees will receive full contracts for 1986/87 but donate 15 percent of their salaries to the university (which will be returned if joint fund-raising efforts are successful)—Ed.

ments—more specifically, the strained relations between Jordan and the PLO and the announcement of a Jordanian five-year development plan and related U.S. funding schemes—that ensure that the economic problems of the universities and the economic prospects of their graduates will be inextricably intertwined with the political dilemmas facing the Palestinian population under occupation.

### *Birzeit University: Financial Crisis on the Boil*

On 31 July, after forty-five days of an open strike by faculty and employees (spurred by nonrenewal of contracts and proposed salary reductions), Dr. Gabi Baramki, vice president of Birzeit University, addressed a crowded meeting of faculty and employees. The atmosphere was tense. A few days earlier, the Birzeit Board of Trustees had announced in the local newspapers a series of measures, including 15 percent salary reductions<sup>‡</sup> for the coming year and the direct control by the board of trustees of all future hiring. The board's determination to end the strike and implement these decisions was underlined for the staff on 31 July, when salaries were not paid as usual.

Dr. Baramki defended the board's decisions as being dictated by the serious financial crisis facing the university and called on faculty and employees to make the necessary sacrifices to preserve Birzeit as an "independent Palestinian national university." Union representatives and faculty members responded by reiterating their proposal to loan the university 15 percent of their salaries and to work together to raise the necessary funds to secure the university's financial future. Several teachers raised the point that the board to date had never presented the university staff with a full picture of the financial crisis or solicited their participation in fund-raising and financial planning.

Perhaps the only point of agreement at this heated meeting was the joint commitment to Birzeit University as an independent Palestinian institution. At present, the two sides remain entrenched in their positions, with the board of trustees unwilling to negotiate further with the union. Even more serious is the fact that there is no emerging consensus on the scope of the financial crisis. Moreover, none of the parties either directly involved

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<sup>‡</sup>Current salaries for Ph.D.s range from JD 400–500 monthly (\$1,000–1,500); for M.A.s from JD 250–300 monthly (\$625–800); and for B.A.s JD 100–200 monthly (\$250–500 U.S. dollars). Some administrative salaries are higher; and wages for maintenance and kitchen employees can be as low as JD 60. The cost of living in the occupied territories is quite high.

or indirectly affected (other West Bank universities, Palestinian communities and organizations outside) have been able to offer either substantive analysis or a detailed program that might begin to meet the challenges posed by the most serious internal crisis Birzeit University has yet faced—a crisis that will almost certainly spread to other universities and institutions in the occupied territories.

The case of the “one-day intervention” of the Council of Higher Education, the coordinating body for accredited institutions of higher learning in the occupied territories, is illustrative. In late June, the Council for Higher Education, hitherto virtually silent on the Birzeit dispute, announced its endorsement of a 15 percent salary cut for *all* West Bank universities. But the following day it withdrew this endorsement, thus removing itself from responsibility and torpedoing a solution (in this case a negative one vis-à-vis faculty demands) that looked beyond Birzeit to the broader crisis in the universities.

### *Financing the Universities: The Next Five Years*

The Council of Higher Education’s about-face underlined the numerous political dynamics that compound the universities’ economic problems, serious as they are. Whether it is political factionalism within the Palestinian national movement, or, in the coming period, the specter of the “Jordanization” of the universities, educators in the occupied territories face an unusual and volatile set of constraints in keeping institutions financially and academically afloat.

In early July, for example, King Hussein of Jordan announced a new five-year economic development plan for the occupied territories.\*\* Included in the \$1.27 billion budget were \$70 million for the universities (as well as \$5 million for an open university). Whether economically hard-hit Jordan will actually be able to secure this money from other states is open to question. If it does, and if the talked-about increase in U.S. assistance to the occupied territories materializes, a source of funding would be created that would be clearly linked to Jordanian and U.S. political objectives in the area.

In a 2 July statement, faculty and employees at Birzeit affiliated with “Shabibah,” the youth movement sympathetic to Fateh, issued a strongly worded attack on all U.S. and Jordanian development schemes and called

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\*\*See Document B3, “Jordan’s Five-Year Development Plan for the Occupied Territories,” in Documents and Source Material Section below—Ed.

on all staff at universities not to cooperate in any way. This resolution is echoed both in student rallies and in the nationalist movement as a whole, but an alternative fund-raising strategy is urgently required. It is true that al-Najah has managed to secure enough funds from the Arab world this year to avert at least temporarily a salary crisis, that Bethlehem has Vatican-related funding and that the Islamic University receives funds from more conservative sources than a secular university could tap. Nonetheless, with the financial difficulties in the Arab world triggered by declining oil prices and intensified by the Iraq-Iran war and other economic and social factors, the universities all face funding problems of some magnitude.

“Jordanization,” of course, offers one route, provided the nationalist consensus is broken and Jordan itself proves financially able, which is questionable. Meanwhile, Birzeit University is in the process of setting up a fund-raising office in the U.S., an important step in diversifying its sources of financing. But if the universities are to maintain their independent Palestinian character, it is the Palestinian community itself which will undoubtedly have to serve as the major financial and organizational reservoir over the next five years. Whether this will involve individual donations or fund-raising campaigns organized among the Palestinian communities of Europe, the Americas, or the Arab world, the Palestinians as a whole will decide the future of the universities by their activity or their neglect.

### *Military Harassment*

A cynical remark frequently heard at Birzeit University during the current faculty strike is that “the military governor must be laughing his head off. We’re closing ourselves this time.” But whatever the satisfaction felt at military headquarters, it did not stop military harassment against the universities, and especially against students, which in this period has taken the form of numerous petty harassments and a campaign of detentions and arrests of students.

Al-Najah University was closed for the entire last week of July by army checkpoints erected near the campus, presumably in anticipation of student protest over the visit of U.S. Vice President George Bush and the accompanying political moves toward an Israeli-Jordanian rapprochement. Students were thus barred from entering the university to take three days of exams, scheduled to begin on 26 July, and hundreds of students appearing for first-year registration were turned away. Birzeit faculty and staff received

the same treatment on 2 August, with all students and staff turned back from the university.

Al-Najah, in particular, has been consistently plagued by de facto one-day closures due to army checkpoints, so much so that these practices have drastically affected the university's academic calendar. On 3 June, the army escalated its harassment of the university and staged a night raid on campus. Eighty soldiers broke into university offices, including the Public Relations Office and that of the dean of students, ransacking files and removing books, papers, and other materials.

The campaign of administrative detention, which hit students particularly hard,<sup>††</sup> has receded during the last months, perhaps due to international protest. In July, however, a wave of town arrests—military restriction orders confining a resident to his or her hometown for a period of six months—hit eighteen residents of the occupied territories, including Ibrahim Muhammad Khadir, a student at al-Najah University from Bayta village, and two students from Bethelam University, 'Isa Ahmad Qaraqqa and Akram Shaban 'Atallah. Of particular interest is the case of a Birzeit employee, Walid 'Abd al-Salam, placed under town arrest in late July, whose order specifically cited his duties at Birzeit University (which include organizing student singing groups and cultural activities) as a cause for his restriction.

### *Student Rallies: A String of Protests*

Harassment has not stopped the student movement, although the last months have witnessed less the mass mobilization of students than a series of "formal" rallies registering student opinion and protest on a number of key political issues, among them the visit of Vice President Bush, the Peres-King Hassan meeting, the closing of Fateh offices in Jordan, the attacks of Amal militias on Palestinian camps in Lebanon, and the killing of students at Yarmuk University by Jordanian security police.

Anti-Jordanian rallies were staged in July at Birzeit and al-Najah universities to protest the Jordanian closure of Palestinian offices. At Birzeit, all factions participated in a united rally. Interestingly, the Birzeit rally, which was orderly and not particularly large due to army checkpoints, was highlighted in Israeli press accounts which uniformly mentioned that threats of "liquidation" had been proffered against Jordanian agents.

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<sup>††</sup>See Penny Johnson, "Palestinian Universities Under Occupation," in *Occupied Territories: Report, Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 4 (Summer 1986)—Ed.

## *New Student Council at al-Najah*

The “Shabibah” slate, sympathetic to the PLO mainstream and Yasir Arafat, swept the summer elections for the eleven-person al-Najah student council, thus maintaining its dominance there. Shabibah also controls the student councils at Birzeit and Hebron universities. The Islamic Bloc still has substantial support on the al-Najah campus, racking up 1,063 votes to Shabibah’s 1,253. Two smaller slates on the left together totaled about 300 votes. Two of the eleven students elected to the council are women.

## *Faculty Dismissals at Islamic University*

In July, the Islamic University in Gaza, which in April had been the scene of clashes between nationalist students, on the one hand, and Islamic Bloc students and university employees on the other,<sup>##</sup> dismissed four staff members sympathetic to the nationalist movement. One of the four, faculty member Dr. Abu Sitte, noted that the dismissals were intended to make the university an “exclusively fundamentalist” institution, while the university contends that the two teachers and two employees committed “breaches of responsibility.” The dismissals were ordered by the University Council and to date have not been ratified by the board of trustees.

The dismissals came amid escalating violence in Gaza, including the 26 June beating by Islamic fundamentalists of a physician, Dr. Muhanna, which left him hospitalized. Many institutions and personalities in Gaza have called for an end to the violence. If the call is not heeded, the Islamic University may well face new problems when it reopens its doors in the autumn, notably the safeguarding of the physical well-being and rights of its students, both nationalist and fundamentalist.

The end of the academic year also witnessed faculty dismissals at the Arab College of Sciences at Abu Dis (Jerusalem). It is not clear, however, if the dismissal of two staff members was due to “surplus” faculty, as the administration claims, financial problems, or political considerations.

## *Academic Programs and Institutional Development*

The most notable institutional addition for the upcoming academic year is the opening of a Faculty of Agriculture at Hebron University. A Faculty of Agriculture has long been an obvious priority in the still primarily rural

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<sup>##</sup>Penny Johnson, *op. cit.*

West Bank, whose agriculture has suffered greatly from restrictions by the military authorities, land confiscation, labor shortages due to employment in Israel, and competition from Israeli agriculture. For many years, however, the military authorities consistently denied permission to any university which applied to open a Faculty of Agriculture (although some courses in agricultural sciences are offered in al-Najah's Biology Department).

This surprising reversal of Israeli policy came at the same time Birzeit seems on the verge of receiving a building permit for its Fine Arts Building, and thus for the enlarged new campus plan as a whole. Construction had originally been scheduled to commence in June 1983, but was delayed by the military-administered Planning Department. It is difficult at this point to determine whether the granting of the long-awaited permits to Hebron and Birzeit (along with al-Najah's permit several months ago, after a seven-year delay, to commence work on its old campus) signals any change in Israeli policy toward the development of the universities on the order of the concession to improve the "quality of life"—or whether it is simply the result of the separate battles resolutely waged by the universities.

Local research institutes, both independent and affiliated with the universities, continue to focus in particular on Palestinian issues in the occupied territories, producing an array of stimulating, if uneven, publications. Among these is the new *Birzeit Research Review*, one of whose aims is to review the existing level of research in the occupied territories and stimulate new directions. Most researchers continue to suffer from a lack of exchange with colleagues outside the occupied territories, and it is hoped that circulating such publications abroad in the aim of receiving academic input will help remedy the situation.

One successful antidote to the isolation of West Bank universities in general has been Birzeit's two summer programs for international students: the International Summer Program involving six-week courses in Arabic and sociology for foreign students, and the International Summer Camps, where foreign students work side by side with Palestinian students in community work projects. Both programs are underway this summer, and are a healthy sign of international cooperation and understanding for the students involved on both sides.

### *University Diploma: Passport to Unemployment?*

A seminar in spring 1986 in Jerusalem, cosponsored by the Arab Graduates Union and al-Najah University, reviewed alarming statistics



about unemployment among university graduates in the occupied territories: figures for current unemployment among university graduates range from 8,000 to 15,000; it is also estimated that only 15 percent of postsecondary graduates find work in their professions. The previous outlets for skilled and professional labor—in Jordan and the Gulf—have been severely tightened, so most prognosticators predict only a worsening of the situation.

Most university educators continue to affirm that the role of the university is not to educate young people to fit into the current economic picture, any more than it is to educate young people to “adjust” to the political situation of military occupation. Rather, the university’s task is to train the professionals, teachers, engineers, scientists, and community leaders who will be a nucleus of skilled labor for the emerging Palestinian state. But above and beyond this, they see with increasing urgency the need for concrete answers—whether revised academic programs, new postsecondary institutions, or job programs—that can benefit the some 2,000 students who graduate each year from universities in the occupied territories.