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Palestinian Universities Under Occupation

Penny Johnson *

Roughly a decade has passed since Palestinians in the occupied territories opened the doors of their own universities, in response to the difficulties Palestinian students faced in seeking higher education abroad and to the increased demand for higher education among the population. Although some were high schools or junior colleges before 1975, the seven major institutions of higher education in the West Bank and Gaza ** have at most had ten years to develop as four-year institutions, including developing curriculum, hiring staff, building new facilities and even new campuses, setting up laboratories, developing libraries, and installing computer and other administrative facilities necessary for a university. These challenges have been compounded by the almost overwhelming problems posed by the Israeli military occupation, which has set up obstacles to the most ordinary academic tasks, in addition to its more visible practices of military-ordered closures and individual harassments of students and faculty.

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**I include here Birzeit University (2,400 students), al-Najah National University in Nablus (3,500 students), Bethlehem University (1,300 students), the Islamic University of Gaza (3,000 students), Hebron University (1,600 students), Hebron Polytechnic Institute (1,000 students), and the University of Jerusalem, which comprises four small colleges (Science and Technology, Nursing, Arts, and Islamic Studies). Note that the University of Jerusalem is in the Jerusalem district and thus not under the military government. Hebron Polytechnic offers only Engineering curriculum. Enrollment figures are approximate.

Consequently, the development of the universities has been nothing short of remarkable. However uneven the process, whatever academic and institutional problems remain to be overcome, it has been an outstanding decade for higher education, with each year presenting its own challenges to the universities' existence and development. The events of the 1985–86 academic year indicate that the second decade will be as crucial as the first in guaranteeing the universities' continued ability to serve Palestinian students and society. For "growing pains," including severe financial crises, internal disputes, and political polarization, have combined with the more familiar harassments of the Israeli military occupation to raise critical questions about the direction, goals, and educational and financial resources of Palestinian higher education as it enters its second decade.

Universities in the News

"Students, Administrations Lock Horns at Local Universities," "Army Shuts Hebron Polytechnic," "Birzeit Faces Financial Threat," "Najah Student Council Head Under Administrative Detention," "Clashes at Islamic University," "Restriction Order Hits Four Students": such are recent headlines in the Jerusalem-based Palestinian press. Not only the local press but also international observers have focused unusual attention on the universities for at least two reasons. One is their status as perhaps the most fully-fledged Palestinian national institutions in the occupied territories; another is the importance and vitality of the student movement, which has more political weight and responsibilities than a Western counterpart.

The expanded role of the universities as national institutions is clear in the often-stated premise that the universities are assisting in "building the infrastructure of a Palestinian state." Building such national institutions has been a key component of Palestinian strategy in the occupied territories; to undermine or destroy these institutions has been a signal aim of Israeli policy, especially since 1979. That these Israeli attacks have often been against the academic function of the universities underlines that the universities serve Palestinian national aspirations precisely in fulfilling their educational mission: under occupation, normal academic processes become infused with political content.

Student Council Elections

The fact that some of the world's most influential media have been following local student council elections is explained partly by the fact that

the universities, where a rough cross section of the youth of Palestinian society meet and work together, serve as one of the clearest “barometers” of political trends in the occupied territories. Indeed, since the dissolution of Palestinian municipalities in 1982, they are one of the few places where elections are held.

The year 1986 opened with a series of student council elections that, in general, confirmed the dominance of the political line of PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat in student politics and thus indicated the continued hold of mainstream PLO politics on the population as a whole. The Youth Movement (*al-Shabibah*), which is sympathetic to the politics of Fateh, won in Birzeit, al-Najah, and Hebron universities. In Birzeit, a united leftist list made a strong showing. The Islamic Bloc, on the other hand, in all three universities did not do as well as predicted, although it is a substantial presence on all campuses. (Last year it won the Hebron elections.) Fear of its victory may have contributed to *al-Shabibah*'s victory in al-Najah, as students sympathetic to the smaller leftist groups cast their vote to *al-Shabibah* to ensure the Islamic Bloc's defeat.

Bethlehem University is an anomaly: its Vatican-linked administration is strangely mismatched with a student council led by *Jabhat al-Amal*, a student bloc sympathetic to the politics of the PFLP. The Islamic University student council is, not surprisingly, held by the Islamic Bloc; throughout April, however, a series of clashes occurred between the bloc and nationalist women students in the university. Sparked when these students held a commemoration of the Dayr Yasin massacre without the permission of the student council, the conflict came to a head after a scuffle between students and a strike by the Islamic Bloc. The administration suspended three nationalist women students—one permanently and one for one year. Two sit-ins at the gates of the university by nationalist women students—one including their family and older women in the community—were met with violence by Islamic Bloc students and employees. One student lost a finger when an employee closed the university gate on it; employees also reportedly used water hoses to disperse the women and their families. About seventy students from nationalist groups also received warning notes from the administration, and an Islamic Bloc female student was attacked with a knife, in a possibly related incident.

While student councils struggle with educational issues, most notably more student representation, as well as tuition and fees, student politics are inevitably shaped by the current state of PLO politics and, since 1982 have been increasingly characterized by factionalism. However, in the wake of King Hussein's 19 February speech breaking off political coordination

with the PLO, groups have united and staged large anti-Jordan rallies in most universities. As a result, the factional situation may have, at least marginally, improved. The election of the al-Najah student council in itself stabilized campus life, as a two-month military-ordered closure in the summer of 1985, combined with disputes over a new student constitution, had left the university without elected student representatives for a number of months.

The “Iron Fist” and the Universities

On 15 April, as extremist settlers were attacking a joint Jewish-Arab peace forum at the Park Hotel in Hebron, the Israeli army broke into the Hebron Polytechnic, beat students, damaged campus facilities, and detained a number of students. The army later announced that the Polytechnic was closed by military order for two weeks. It did not escape a number of commentators, Jewish as well as Arab, that Palestinian students were detained and Jewish settlers left free.

The army's closure of the Polytechnic was the first such closure this academic year—and it is relevant that it occurred at the relatively obscure Polytechnic, which lacks the experience to wage an international campaign on its behalf. It is generally accurate to say that closures of universities are less determined by the event itself (whether a student-army clash, book exhibit, cultural week) than by prevailing policy considerations.

The case of Land Day 1986 at Birzeit University is illustrative. On 31 March, a large contingent of soldiers arrived at the old campus of the university, where many students had gathered to commemorate Land Day. The army opened fire on the students with live ammunition, rubber bullets, and tear gas. The gunfire was heavy, the heaviest, some faculty members say, in their memory. Soldiers shot three students in the leg. As in the November 1984 case of Sharaf al-Tibi, a wounded student who was held at an army checkpoint and died before reaching the hospital, the army delayed the entrance of an ambulance to the campus for about one hour. Soldiers took wounded student Jamal Abu Kuwayk to the Israeli-run Hadassah Hospital and held him incommunicado for four days with periodic interrogation. Military police took two other students from their hospital beds in Muqassid Hospital to Hadassah for further interrogation.

The scenario seemed ripe for a closure, but none was announced. A common explanation was that Israeli Prime Minister Peres was in Washington, and the timing was poor for a university closure. More generally, the announced goal of an improvement in the “quality of life” in the

occupied territories may mitigate against open acts against educational institutions. This trend, which roughly represents the “Americanization” of Israel’s West Bank policy, is countered by the extremist settler movement’s demand that al-Najah and Birzeit universities be permanently closed. It remains to be seen which voice is more powerful.

Nonetheless, a shift away from closures and towards a hard-hitting campaign against the student movement and students per se can be detected. It is in the latter that the “iron fist,” announced by Israeli spokesmen in August 1985, can be most clearly felt.

Student Movement Under Siege

Among the sixty-two Palestinian residents who received administrative detention orders in early September 1985, thirty-three were students. As the numbers mounted in the next months, the proportion of students remained roughly half. Almost all the heads of West Bank student councils were among the detainees.

Administrative detention is one of the most powerful weapons in the arsenal assembled by Israeli military planners to institute the “iron fist” in the occupied territories. It is, quite simply, imprisonment without charge or trial and is an excellent device for detaining political activists and community representatives who have committed no chargeable offense.***

Student leaders are prime examples of this category. Even before the “iron fist,” Israeli officials made clear that students were to be targeted. In a June press conference, outgoing civil administrator Colonel Freddy Zach listed among other “improvements” of the past year a policy to bar student “troublemakers” from campus, rather than to close universities. The fact that a military order shuttered al-Najah University for two months shortly thereafter illustrates that the army seeks “flexibility” in its methods, rather than limiting its options. It also underlines the power of the other school of thought, the settler movement, which demanded strong action following the killing of a settler in Nablus, an event unrelated to the university.

At present, the number of administrative detainees, including students, has been reduced, but al-Najah University student council head Khalil ‘Ashur remains behind bars, along with a number of other students. Significantly, student detentions in general have been very high in the past six months. This includes both students detained and subsequently released

***See Emma Playfair, *Administrative Detention in the West Bank* (Ramallah: Law in the Service of Man, 1986).

without any charge (the most common category) and students who are charged with security offenses (which include political offenses, like membership in an illegal organization, as well as participation in illegal demonstrations, stone throwing, etc.).

The effect of such measures on the student movement is hard to gauge; they certainly have not succeeded in halting its activity or support among students. It remains true that students in the occupied territories, who are in fact the “generation of occupation,” are one of the groups both most affected by the occupation and most active in resisting it.

Institutional Development

As students continue to clamor for places in the universities, most institutions continue their ambitious plans for expansion, both in facilities and programs. Al-Najah, for example, has recently added master's programs in Arabic and Chemistry to its master's program in Education. This development occurs again within the context of harassment by the authorities: no university, for example, has been permitted to launch an agricultural sciences program. The most common stumbling block to physical expansion is the denial of building permits. Birzeit University has been waiting since June 1984 for permission to begin its Fine Arts Building. Al-Najah, after a seven-year wait, was permitted in March to start construction on its old campus; construction on the new campus is still forbidden. Added to these problems at the moment is a growing financial crisis in the universities, and indeed in most West Bank institutions.

Financial Crisis

The unusual demands on the young Palestinian universities in the occupied territories—from almost unceasing expansion to the extra expenses incurred as semesters are rescheduled and academic years dragged out due to closures and disruptions—were met in the past by resolute fundraising and extra income generated from supporters of the universities and sustained by the Arab economic boom and the general strength of the Palestinian movement.

In the past two years, dwindling donations from Arab institutions to the West Bank Council for Higher Education (a coordinating and accreditation body for universities in the occupied territories) reduced the Council's annual contribution to the universities by 30 percent. A central cause is the economic recession in the Arab world and the fall in oil prices. Birzeit

University was the first to be seriously hit: in recent months, the Board of Trustees and administration have announced a series of drastic measures, the last being to notify all faculty that their contracts for the next academic year will not be renewed. This fiat was softened by repeated reassurances that the university would try to rehire most faculty members—perhaps using a different salary scale.

Birzeit's Union of Faculty and Employees has strongly rejected any measures effecting faculty-employee salaries or job security and proposed a joint committee, including faculty and student representatives, to guide the university through the crisis. They have underlined their demands with a series of strikes. To date, new contracts have not been issued.

In addition to the clear management-labor dimension of the crisis, alternative political interpretations of the crisis abound. Many students affirm, for example, either that there is no financial crisis or that the measures taken to solve it are designed to reinstitute the university as an institution serving only the "elite" in Palestinian society and to weaken its nationalist character. Some steps have been taken, most notably the expansion of the Birzeit Board of Trustees, to establish a new basis of trust and confidence between different elements in the university, a basis that is sorely needed. Birzeit is also currently launching a fundraising campaign and hopes to tap sources in the U.S. and Europe, as well as the Arab world, to stabilize its financial future.

Birzeit may not be alone for long in its financial wilderness: administration members at al-Najah have been issuing warning signals, and Hebron University has raised its student fees, citing financial constraints. An ongoing financial crisis will sharply raise the question of decision making in the universities, and thus will be a field for political struggle in an already polarized environment.