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Palestinian Higher Education: National Identity, Liberation, and Globalization

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Palestine is part of the Arab world; the Palestinian people, irrespective of their national and residential status, are also part of the Arab nation. **[End Page 75]** In an important way, no discussion of the evolution of higher education in Palestine and of the Palestinian people can take place outside the two decisive contexts within which it developed and was shaped: the emergence of higher education in the Arab world itself; and the colonial and semicolonial context of higher education, which affected, both positively and negatively, its organization, curriculum, purposes, and contemporary questions.

1

The contemporary Arab world boasts of founding perhaps one of the oldest universities in the world, namely, the Azhar University of Cairo. Founded in 972 A.D., it has continued, since that date, to impart higher education not only to Arabs but also to Muslims throughout the world. While a graduate of the Azhar University of the tenth century would note some kinship with the present university, the Cairo-based Azhar University of today is more modern in its curriculum, structure and organization, certification, accreditation, and overall purpose, so that it might be almost unrecognizable **[End Page 76]** by its tenth-century graduate. Then, and now, its scholars and students came from all over the known world and affected the growth of higher education in important societies East and West. Other similar institutions developed throughout the Muslim world: thus institutions of higher education distinguished themselves in Tunis, Fez, Baghdad, Damascus, and Jerusalem, stretching as far north as Seville, Cordoba, Toledo, and south to Timbuktu and Jenne. These and similar institutions contributed enormously to the knowledge base of Islamic society and made it possible for that society to contribute in no small way to European development and to the development of the European institutions of higher learning (for example, the Universities of Paris and Padua).

It is useful to point out some common characteristics of the system of higher education that prevailed then and that continue today. All such institutions were essentially open to all those who could benefit from them. A certificate (*Ijaza*) was issued by the master scholar (*'Alim*) to his disciples, which made it possible for the disciples to impart knowledge or to become judges. The state as such had no authority over the system. Only when the state wanted control and engaged in a conflict over legitimization did it actually sponsor such educational institutions. Another characteristic of the system was its free access. Students did not pay for their education, and the scholars received income from endowments bequeathed by benefactors. These institutions of higher education existed within mosques, which were generally endowed by private philanthropists and occasionally by the state but were free and open to the public. It is clear from the historical record that such institutions, developed to impart knowledge, which was highly valued by society, in fact produced an elite that met the needs of the society of the time. The educated elite (the *Ulama* [scholars]) had considerable prestige, recognition, and responsibility throughout the Islamic and Arab world.

The decline of the Arab world—in particular, from the sixteenth century on—clearly contributed to the decline of the traditional higher-educational system. This became evident as the “modern” Arab state began to take shape by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Updating the educational system became an important priority in Tunis, Egypt, Lebanon, and eventually throughout the Arab world. In that sense, “modernization” meant that the institutional base of society had to be transformed sufficiently to become more Europeanized, or Westernized. Push-pull forces incorporated the Arab world into the world system of the time. The “modernizers” of the system thought that this transformation would enable [End Page 77] them to mount a better defense of their societies, to halt the alleged or perceived decline of their societies, and to benefit more from their own social and economic resources.

2

An important outcome of the modernization effort was the emergence of the higher-educational system of the contemporary Arab world. It is quite recognizable in its most basic features, having been modeled on the European system, to which the early modernizers directed their efforts and emulated. Although the founder of modern Egypt, Muhammad Ali, did not establish a modern university, the specialized schools of technology, languages, medicine, and engineering that he did establish were, in fact, staffed by former Egyptian students who were sent abroad specifically to acquire Western knowledge, science, and technology, and who eventually established the needed institutions. The same was true of the Tunisian effort. The American University of Beirut, which was founded in the mid-nineteenth century as the Syrian Protestant College, was an important variation on that effort and an important contribution to the growth of the modernized higher-educational system. These efforts and other institutional models heralded the higher-educational institutions of the modern Arab world. Cairo claims the first actual national university, which was established at the time when Egypt was semicolonized by Britain. The Egyptian University, later named King Fouad 1 University and, after 1952, Cairo University, was founded in 1908 by private initiative, but, because of continuing financial difficulties, the Egyptian state took

over its management. Since that time, not only in Egypt but also throughout the Arab world, the state has been responsible for the newly established higher-educational system, which had very little in common with the centuries-old higher-educational system with which people were familiar. Based on the European model, one would readily note the new campus and the new structure of the universities—the Colleges of Law, Medicine, Commerce and Business Administration, and Arts. The new system, which was state controlled, simply bypassed the traditional one and essentially marginalized it. Only in the 1950s did the state undertake efforts to transform the traditional system of higher education by altering its structure, organization, and curriculum to make it more like the newly established modern system.

The development of modern higher education in the rest of the Arab world was both similar to and somewhat at variance with the Egyptian experience. **[End Page 78]** Like Egypt, traditional institutions continued to impart education, though it was an education that was increasingly irrelevant to the needs of modern society. But modern institutions, such as the Universities of Damascus, Baghdad, Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers, and King Muhammad the 5th (Morocco), developed in the context of colonized or semicolonized societies. After the First World War, almost all of the central Arab world and North Africa, within which the modern states of Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, and Tunisia developed, were controlled by different colonial powers (Britain, France, Italy, and Spain). Higher education developed quite slowly in these countries, and the principal universities in such places functioned and grew to serve colonial and reluctantly national needs.

One cannot think of the modern political, administrative, and cultural elite in the Arab countries without giving due consideration to these institutions, notwithstanding their colonial and neocolonial origins and constraints. It is virtually impossible to think of national independence movements without ascribing considerable importance to the nascent elite produced by these newly established universities. University students actively participated in the struggle for independence, exercised considerable pressure on the political elites in the countries, and provided the movements with trained cadres. After independence, the graduates of these institutions provided the needed manpower for the building processes undertaken by the state. But it should also be mentioned that access to these institutions was quite limited. Although all of the state universities (the only private universities at that time were the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo, and the [French] University of St. Joseph in Beirut) restricted admission, thus allowing only the elite to enroll, in conformity with nineteenth-century concepts, they became, over time, more sensitive to the growing needs of society and struggled to allocate resources to more students. Whereas in the mid-fifties there were no more than a dozen universities catering to a few thousand students, today there are approximately one hundred universities in the Arab world imparting higher education to more than three million students. Although the development is quite impressive, it is clear that the university population today is less than half of what it should be. Thus, major efforts are under way to provide greater access, expand facilities, and further “modernize” the already once-modernized higher-educational system. The ongoing pressure to “democratize” higher education and to provide access to historically deprived groups within each society (women, refugees, and so forth), initiated soon after the transfer of power to national

authorities in the fifties and sixties, has prompted new developments, including [End Page 79] tutorial distance learning and private, for-profit institutions of higher learning. These are intended to provide access to those who want a qualitatively superior higher education, preferably in English, than that provided by state institutions or to those who cannot meet the criteria for admission but who are able to "purchase" higher education. These are new developments in the Arab world that may achieve greater importance as the process of globalization envelops it.

3

Palestine of the mandate period (1922–1948) was an integral part of the Ottoman state, which collapsed by the end of the First World War. Britain legitimated its 1917 military conquest of Palestine by accepting the "mandate" of the Council of the League of Nations in 1922. Although the purpose of the mandate was to help the population develop "self-governing" institutions, it, in fact, was more concerned with its fulfillment of Lord Balfour's promise to facilitate "the establishment of the Jewish National Home" in Palestine. More relevant for our purposes, the colonial administration of Palestine established a highly restricted system of basic education, and an even more selective system of secondary education, for Palestine's Arab population. But it did not in any way contribute to the establishment of a system of higher education. By the mid-forties, only two junior colleges (the Arab College and the Rashidiyya College, both in Jerusalem), with an approximate total enrollment of about sixty students, were slated for teaching and colonial service; one school of law operated as a night school.

These institutions, as well as the entire system of education, collapsed after the dismemberment of Palestine in 1948. For all practical purposes, Palestine ceased to exist as a defined administrative, political entity. It was replaced by Israel, which occupied about 80 percent of Palestinian land, by the Jordanian West Bank, and the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip (both occupying the other 20 percent of the land). Although Palestine passed into history, the Palestinian people did not. Some remained in Palestine (about eight hundred thousand, roughly half of those who lived there in 1948). Those who were expelled from their homeland found refuge in adjacent Arab states, and, eventually, some of these people moved on to settle in other parts of the world.

Today, the Palestinian people, living in Israel and the Israeli-occupied areas of the West Bank and Gaza, and throughout the world, number about eight and one-half million people. Of these, approximately four million live in historic Palestine. Of these, about one million live in [End Page 80] Israel and are unequal citizens of that state. The close to three million others live in the Israeli-occupied areas referred to since 1967 as the West Bank (including Arab Jerusalem) and Gaza. The Oslo Agreement of 1993, which Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed under the auspices of the United States, made the transfer of certain civil functions and powers to the Palestinian Authority possible. The Palestinian Authority now exercises its civil jurisdiction over 3 percent of the area of the West Bank and Gaza, while Israel continues to occupy the entire area and rule some three million Palestinians.

4

Until 1972, when the first Palestinian Arab university was formally established in the small Palestinian town of Birzeit, about ten miles north of Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank, Palestinians throughout the Arab region strove for and, indeed, attained higher education. They were driven by a combination of motives: indigenous values that emphasized the virtue of learning, which conferred upper-class status on those who acquired the highest level of learning and professionalism; an expanding market in the Arab states, where most of them found refuge (and thus the need for skilled manpower); and, finally, Palestinian recognition that their 1948 defeat (and the defeat of the Arab states) by Israel was in part related to the superior education of their adversary. The recovery of Palestine and the Palestinian quest for independence and sovereignty was directly related to the acquisition of skills and culture, which are implied in the process of a modern higher education. Of course, Palestinians, admittedly in small numbers, pursued a university education during the mandate period at the region's universities. Until 1948, Palestinians attended the American University of Beirut and the Egyptian universities in Cairo, Alexandria, Al-Azhar, and Dar al-Ulum. Smaller numbers attended the American University in Cairo and, later, Damascus University and the University of Baghdad. Fortunately for Palestinians, after 1948, the Arab states of the region admitted academically qualified Palestinian students to their state universities on almost an equal footing with nationals. Thus thousands of qualified Palestinians, many of whom were refugees from Palestine—and for the most part stateless—with very limited financial resources, attended Arab universities for free. They worked hard to acquire the skills that would make them competitive in the markets of the developing Arab states, allow them to contribute to the **[End Page 81]** economic and social recovery of their families, and enable them to resume, with greater organizational and technical skills, the struggle for Palestinian national identity and sovereignty. The struggle became even more urgent as Palestinians came to realize their anomalous existence as a nation in exile in a world of sovereign nation-states. Three decades after their defeat, Palestinians have transformed their status—of course, differentially by region and residence—essentially because of the high number of university-educated citizens. The first comprehensive survey of the Palestinian university student population, conducted in 1979, revealed that approximately sixty thousand students attended universities throughout the world (the Palestinian population at the time was four million). For every one thousand Palestinians, then, fifteen were studying at a university. While the ratio of 15:1000 was equal to that of Lebanon at the time, it was higher than any of the Arab states in the region, and higher than most Third World countries. Significantly, the lowest Palestinian ratios for the period were those related to the Palestinian citizens of Israel and those of the West Bank and Gaza: For Israel, the ratio was 3:1000; for the West Bank (which, at the time, had recently established three universities), the ratio was 5:1000. The admissions policies of Israeli universities regarding Palestinians have been clearly discriminatory and account for the low ratios. Such practices are similar to the race/ethnicity-based admission policies encountered by black and other minority students in the First World.

The interest among Palestinians in obtaining a university education was reinforced by the establishment in Palestine of several institutions of higher education. Financial support for these institutions came, for the most part, from the PLO, which was, at the time, committed to a program of national liberation.

Several considerations underlay the establishment of these institutions. First, it became evident that Israel, as the occupying military power that covets the land but wants to rid it of the Palestinian population, pursued complex policies to undermine the national identity of the Palestinians and to transform what remained Arab in Palestine. Students who studied in other countries often were not permitted by Israel to return to their homeland, or, when they were permitted to return, were arrested and incarcerated in Israeli prisons. On the other hand, Palestinians who had gained admission to universities in other Arab or overseas countries were frequently denied permits to leave the country. Still others did not have the financial resources to travel outside the country, even when tuition was free. Finally, the need for skilled individuals to confront the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and for the cadres to run civil society gave **[End Page 82]** impetus to the development of universities in these areas. The popular sentiment, then and now, was that national institutions of higher learning can contribute immeasurably to the articulation and development of a national consciousness. They can provide training in the development of Palestinian society itself and can strengthen the social and cultural foundations of a society torn asunder by a unique military occupation imposed by a settler colonial state.

In important ways, then, universities were intended to contribute to the process of national liberation and, later on, to the process of national integration of the Palestinian people, who have endured an existence, for almost a century, as either an occupied or subjugated population. But it should also be emphasized that the effort to sponsor and support national institutions of higher learning, articulated and expressed powerfully in *Palestine Open University: A Feasibility Study*, carried out by UNESCO at the behest of the PLO in 1979–1980, was intended to make possible the training of Palestinians to use their national values and acquired skills for developing Palestinian society on their own soil. For at that time, it was clear that skilled Palestinians provided the desperately needed manpower for the developing Arab states, especially of the Gulf region, while considerable numbers settled and found good opportunities in the countries in which they completed their university education. For these reasons, it was in the best interests of the country to instill in Palestinians a sensitivity and concern for national priorities and needs.

5

Palestine's institutions of higher education were developed under the most trying social, political, and economic circumstances, the result of a military occupation determined to disempower Palestinian society. Nevertheless, today, Palestine has eight universities and four colleges, all of which offer bachelor's degrees in the arts and sciences. A few now offer graduate programs in limited fields that lead to master's degrees in the arts and sciences. Al-Najah University offers a doctorate degree in chemistry. Total enrollment at these institutions is slightly more than fifty-two thousand students, drawn from a population base of slightly less than three million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, a ratio of about 18:1000. This number is quite impressive, given that total student enrollment in 1979 in the West Bank was thirty-five hundred. Although the admission policies of Palestinian universities enable Palestinians in the diaspora (the majority of the **[End Page 83]** Palestinian people) and in Israel to enroll,

Israeli policies of exclusion make it almost impossible for such students to take advantage of the privilege of studying at universities in the West Bank or Gaza. These students now compete, on an unequal footing, with nationals for admission to other state institutions.

Without question, the rise of these universities in Palestine was a response to the desperate need to meet the increasing demand for national higher education in situ, but it was also qualitatively related to the protection and enhancement of Palestinian culture and cultural values. The goals set forth in the mission statements of these institutions are telling: to impart knowledge to students, to serve the needs of the Palestinian people, to provide the skills necessary for Palestinians to develop their culture and social and economic institutions, and to meet the needs of a developing Palestinian society and economy. But they are also concerned with the cultivation of important cultural values of honesty, patriotism, cooperative work, and communal contribution. The founders and first presidents of Palestinian universities had varied academic backgrounds. They were physicists, mathematicians, computer specialists, political scientists, and engineers. Without exception, they trained at Arab national universities and at European/American institutions of higher learning. They were familiar with the organized structure of universities and adapted the European/American models with only minor modifications. None really accepted the concept of the American liberal arts curriculum but implemented some of its provisions. They did accept, more or less, the two-semester school year and the credit hour as the basis of the "course." Sequential requirements were also put into place. A visitor from either the European or the North American system would recognize the similarities. To my mind, it is important to remember that the system that has been implemented, in fact, has nothing in common with the traditional Arab system of higher education.

The curriculum of the Palestinian university is similarly conceived: It is designed to impart general skills in preparation for some kind of professional training. Thus knowledge and courses are organized within departments that are housed within certain colleges—for example, history is part of the Faculty/College of Arts, physics, the Faculty/College of Science; political science is part of the Faculty/College of Arts, economics, the Faculty/College of Commerce, and so on. Interdisciplinary work is minimal and is not particularly valued. Professional education in law and agriculture, among other disciplines, is carried out through independent colleges; **[End Page 84]** one pursues professional education without going through the liberal arts preparatory phase. Completing the required 120–30 credit hours, divided between general college and university requirements and specialization in majors and minors, qualifies the student for a bachelor's degree (of arts or science). Obtaining a university degree is a high priority for any Palestinian today. It is not an exaggeration to say that education is degree driven, and the market is now quite receptive to the notion of education and to the importance of a degree.

Palestinian university students are educated by Palestinian professors. Many of the academic staff, some 798 (about 45 percent) out of 1,726, obtained their highest degree (the Ph.D.) at a European or American university. Very few obtained their highest degree at an Ivy League or equivalent university.

Completion of the doctorate was made financially possible by a combined effort on the part of the universities themselves, which invested in their faculty development, and fellowship support from various European and American foundations.

Both students and faculty use a variety of resources; often, college textbooks from the United States are used in class, despite the fact that teaching is principally in Arabic with occasional use of English for technical and scientific purposes. Library resources are quite limited. The library holdings of the entire university system hardly exceed six hundred thousand volumes in both Arabic and English. Laboratory facilities are available but are inadequate.

Three conclusions can be reached from this all too brief depiction of the organized system of higher education in Palestine. First, no university is currently a complete university. Only one university has the beginning of a medical school; two universities have weakly staffed law schools; none has a school of journalism or communication. Graduate education is in the early stage of development and cannot sustain serious research. The weakest part of the system is that of research, especially in the basic social and physical sciences and advanced technology.

The second conclusion is that the system, which is based on the European and American systems, is intended to produce the needed manpower to staff "modern" sectors of society. The graduates of these universities are equipped to teach at the secondary-school level, to staff the civil service, to work in the service industry, in banking, and in business, but they can also be integrated into the global system, especially if his or her second language (English) skills are strong. Thus far, the system has not [End Page 85] produced adequately trained people to undertake the serious study of Palestinian society itself so that concrete society-based research can become the basis for national policies.

Finally, the system has not yet produced a critical faculty that is prepared to question the legitimacy and utility of the inherited system of higher education prevalent today. There are no critical studies of literature, philosophy, law, or history that could make an important contribution to the development of society as a whole. Nor are there critical studies of alternative ways of organizing knowledge to better meet the specific needs of a society struggling to consolidate its nationhood. It is becoming more clear that the onset of globalization will have an important impact on the training of new personnel and will thus bring about some important changes in the structure and requirements of the educational system, which would serve to further integrate it with the new hegemonic order.

6

It is useful to place the significant achievements, as well as the contemporary struggles, of Palestinian higher education within the framework of its historic origin as a liberating alternative to Israeli control.

First, all Palestinian universities are young. The oldest is less than thirty years old, while the youngest is approximately ten years old. All were developed during

the 1970s and 1980s. Some of them, such as Birzeit University and al-Najah National University, had their origins in elementary and secondary schools that were initially established in the 1920s. Thus, from the beginning, they were the product of private, nongovernmental, not-for-profit institutions controlled and guided by boards of trustees. The same was true of al-Quds (Jerusalem) and Hebron Universities. Although they had no "endowment" to speak of, they were able to attract financial support from wealthy Palestinians who donated generously and made possible the existing campuses. For all practical purposes, every university building in Palestine was made possible by gifts from either individual Palestinians working in the Gulf States or sympathetic non-Palestinian Arab philanthropists. Two institutions, Bethlehem University and the Islamic University of Gaza, relied on external, "religiously" oriented support; still others, such as al-Azhar University of Gaza and al-Quds Open University, relied on the direct financial support of the PLO. All Palestinian institutions of higher learning received modest and diminishing financial support from the European Union, which enabled them, in the past, to cover some of their recurrent **[End Page 86]** expenses. Today, all suffer considerably from the scarcity of financial resources to support their educational programs. Tuition paid by the student covers at best one-third (equivalent to one thousand dollars a year) of the cost of his or her education. In a society in which unemployment hovers around 50 percent, incomes are very low, and the economy is seriously undermined by an alien military occupation that tries to cover its costs of occupation by imposing steep taxes on the population, it is virtually impossible for Palestinian universities to find alternative sources of support to carry out their current educational tasks and pursue institutional development. Yet they have heroically carried on, despite their chronic financial woes and other, perhaps more serious, problems as well.

In view of these obvious economic difficulties, one may ask, Does Palestine need so many institutions of higher education today? Are there alternatives to imparting a university education to the same or to a more expanded student population? The answer is neither simple nor clear. The universities carry within them the seeds of their origin. They grew in response to the evident need of a Palestinian population that has been impeded in its access to universities for various reasons. Certainly the blockade imposed by the occupation on the two parts of Palestine—the West Bank and Gaza—and the isolation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank made it inevitable that the two parts of Palestine would have to cater to their populations separately. Hence there are now two universities in the Gaza Strip with a combined student population of more than twenty thousand. The roadblocks and frequent Israeli military intervention within the West Bank have effectively created four zones within which these universities lie: the south (Hebron and Bethlehem Universities); Jerusalem (al-Quds University); the center (Birzeit University); and the north (al-Najah National University). The difficulty of moving through roadblocks and military checkpoints as a result of the occupation and the frequent so-called military closures account for the emergence of universities in more accessible areas. The continuing occupation of Israel effectively makes it impossible for such universities to merge or to form consortiums and thus to achieve greater consolidation and efficiency.

Three significant issues need to be addressed in this context: the occupation itself, the nature of a society that remains somewhat underdeveloped and

traditional but hemmed in by a military occupation, and the absence of an independent national authority that is able to assume responsibility for an effective system of education at all levels.

The occupation had a direct negative impact on the development of [End Page 87] Palestinian universities and seriously undermined their possibilities. First, no university was actually licensed to provide higher education. Thus, until today, the academic degrees granted by these institutions were not accredited by Israel. Second, Israel not only refused to accommodate these institutions and to recognize their absolute value but also actually interfered, by various means, with their operation. It taxed heavily their entire book and laboratory imports, disregarding the universal edict that exempts educational material from state taxation. It banned more than two thousand books from various fields and subjected others to serious censorship. It often confiscated educational material. Israel taxed the population heavily but withheld any financial subsidies from higher education. It frequently imposed curfews on Palestinian towns and villages and thus prevented universities from functioning normally. More significantly, however, it frequently ordered the closure of universities as a form of punishment for students who may have raised the Palestinian flag or demonstrated their sympathy and support for the cause of Palestinian independence and sovereignty. No university was ever exempted from the draconian measures of the Israeli military. All universities were closed periodically by the military occupation. The most sustained closure, ostensibly in response to the *Intifada*, lasted four years, from 1988 to 1991. Despite the order to close, the universities resorted to holding classes at hastily arranged alternative sites. Students and faculty took exceptional risks in availing themselves of the opportunity to attend classes clandestinely at private homes, mosques, churches, cafés, and other public venues.

The consequence of this educational struggle for Palestine and against the occupation is not difficult to discern: a weaker education that lacked the intellectual support of libraries and laboratories, the synergy that comes from personal and group encounters, and the social impact of alternative styles of behavior, of life, of relationships between males and females in a somewhat conservative society, and of social interaction across a religious divide. It is also important to point out that the occupation denied the legitimacy of the degrees of students who graduated during the years that the universities were "officially" closed. As lawyers for these graduates argued, Israel intended to shut down not only the buildings but also the minds within; it failed to achieve this goal.

The Israelis have resorted to other repressive measures that have made it difficult for Palestinian universities to function normally. Early on, in its effort to entrench itself in the occupied areas of the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli occupation adopted the policy of banishing—expelling—the Palestinian [End Page 88] cultural elite, whom the Israelis presumed would incite the people to resist the occupying forces. Between 1967 and 1990, more than two thousand members of the Palestinian cultural, professional, and intellectual elite were banished from Palestine. These individuals were apprehended by the military, transported and dumped at the border of Jordan or Lebanon, and not allowed to return to their homeland. Those banished included presidents of universities as well as professors and students, including members of the elected student

councils. Acting presidents and other officials of universities frequently have been summoned for interrogation by the military and given serious warnings to exercise greater control over their students or risk closure of the facility. Many students have been injured or killed in the process of striking or demonstrating; some universities have dedicated memorials to the students killed by the occupying forces. According to Mahmoud Mi'ari, of the estimated ten thousand "political" prisoners held in Israeli prisons from 1983 to 1993, an estimated 18 percent were Palestinian students.¹ These repressive measures continue. Hardly a day passes that the Israeli Army does not apprehend a student (or a faculty member). The target of such arrests and incarcerations frequently are students who have already graduated but who were politically active while attending their universities. Some of these former students were members of the elected student councils, which suggests that the occupation forces intend to convey the message to current students that the time will come when they, too, will be detained in an Israeli prison for no particular infraction of any law, but, rather, because they were politically active as students.

Perhaps it is useful to conclude this section by relating an important story that illustrates the difficult path of Palestinian university students and faculty, and to do so in the context of the so-called Declaration of Principles of September 1993, which was to initiate, officially and formally, a period of constructive disengagement of Palestine and Israel from one another.

In "A Long Overdue Wedding," an article in the respected Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, Israeli writer Gideon Levy tells the story of thirty-two-year-old Jihad Shahada, a graduate student in the last phase of completing his M.A. thesis in physics at al-Najah National University in Nablus who had plans to marry in mid-August 1997. About two thousand invited guests were already present at the wedding hall. Shahada went to Ramallah (less than an hour away from Jericho, where the wedding was to be celebrated) to buy [End Page 89] fresh flowers for his bride. On the way, he was apprehended by the Shin Bet, Israel's secret police, who intended to recruit him to become a collaborator for the Israeli occupation. He refused on the spot, and his pleas to the Israelis to let him get back to his bride were of no avail. He was hauled off to prison, where he was pressured, threatened, abused, and severely punished for his refusal to become an informer. No charges were ever brought against him, but he was incarcerated under the rubric of "administrative detention," an edict inherited from the British Emergency Regulations days. One and a half years later, he was finally freed, even though he still refused to become an informant against his own people. This was his second imprisonment; previously, he had served a three-year term, though he had committed no crime.²

The story illustrates two points. First, it reveals the Israeli effort to thwart Palestinian education by recruiting students for positions as informers and to defeat the Palestinian quest for independence and sovereignty. Palestinian higher education has had to contend with many impediments, some structural, some financial, and some the result of a unique and exceptional military occupation that is unprecedented in the chronicles of higher education in modern times.

The story of Jihad Shahada also suggests the age difference between students

who pursue their education under normal circumstances and those who do so in the context of a military occupation. Until most recently, the typical Palestinian male student would spend an average of six years at a university to obtain his first degree. The reasons are not difficult to surmise: serving one or more prison sentences for hoisting the Palestinian flag, singing the national anthem, participating in student politics, and peacefully demonstrating against the occupation, not to mention the impromptu closure of universities by order of the military as a form of collective punishment.

7

Palestinian society is committed to implementing the internationally ratified human right to education to all who are able to benefit from it. Palestinian institutions of higher education offer educational opportunities to the best of their abilities. Today, these institutions are able to provide [End Page 90] a university education to nearly half of those who successfully complete their secondary education. Palestinian universities have been successful in providing both males and females, almost equally, with higher education. Across the country, females comprise about 43 percent of the total enrollment. This reflects both the universities' open admission policies as well as a fundamental change in societal values that has occurred over the past decades. This change relates to the value that families today, unlike in the past, ascribe to educated females. Whereas the process of social and cultural change is a complex one and occurs slowly, Palestinian universities have played an important role in encouraging this process of change. A university education in Palestine, whether by accident or by design, tends to be coeducational. Positive interaction between females and males in classes, on campus, and through other university activities has contributed considerably to the acceptability of the Palestinian female in the "educational place," despite the dominant role of the Palestinian male in society. The impact of that change is evident in Palestinian society today. More women have become part of the labor force (though not enough, certainly), and more women are earning graduate degrees and are being incorporated into the university as teachers and researchers.

The universities have played another important role in the political socialization of students and thus in contributing to the process of the democratic transition. Early on, universities accepted the reality of student activism (especially student resistance to the military occupation) and their modest role in university governance. Every institution today has a dean of students, whose role is quite political; he works closely with the student council. The student council of a typical Palestinian university has two roles: one is political, the other is occupational. The two are clearly fused in the Palestinian setting. One cannot divorce the issue of raising tuition, which is an educational/economic issue, from the environmental issue. Resisting the increase, students are likely to use sources of support that are actually societal or political. Although the issue is tuition, it is easily transformed into a societal-cum-political issue. The high degree of politicization of society reflects itself in student consciousness and behavior. Thus all universities have more or less free elections for the student council. Students run for office not only as representatives of their classmates but also as representatives of political groupings. Over time, interested parties, national as well as adversarial, have