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Palestinian Universities under Occupation 15 May–15 August 1988

Lee O'Brien*

Palestinian universities in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip have now been closed for nine months—an unprecedented academic year. At the beginning of August, universities learned of the extension of their monthly closure orders from the newspapers rather than from official sources; in mid-August, the news that all universities would remain closed, definitely until 1 October and afterwards, “until further notice” came also via the media.

Faced with this further indefinite closure, educators and administrators are trying to adjust to the conditions of the uprising. While some universities have been able to maintain at least a presence through “traditional” staff and student activities, others have not, and virtually none has developed functional or creative alternatives to closed campuses.

Protesting the Closures

Despite the mounting death toll and arrests, the Palestinian uprising shows no sign of abating. Senior officers in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) Central Command state that the *intifadah* could continue for years (*Jerusalem Post*, 8 July 1988). Though the argument that universities are “hotbeds of agitation” has been visibly disproved by the continuation of the uprising despite the closure of all educational facilities, there is now a very real fear

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among educators and students that the elimination of universities will become just another new “fact on the ground,” deplored but accepted. The need for a concerted campaign to pressure the Israelis is considered a priority by educators and political activists alike. Communique no. 23 of the Unified National Command of the Uprising, issued 5 August, states:

The UNCU wishes to affirm that the closure of universities and colleges and the premature end of the school year are meant to keep our people ignorant. We therefore have no recourse but to rely on ourselves to educate our youth; popular education must continue, and our universities must find ways to resume education there, especially for students in their final years. We call upon the Council for Higher Education to shoulder its responsibility and to press for the reopening of the universities and colleges.

In a 21 June open letter to the secretary-general of the United Nations, written on behalf of the Council of Higher Education, Birzeit University acting-president Gabi Baramki noted:

The complacent irresponsibility and hostility of the Israeli authorities proves that they are not fit to be entrusted with the education of Palestinian youth, or the provision of any other services to our people. We therefore call upon you in your position as secretary general of the United Nations, and upon all international organizations, governments, educational institutions, and human rights organizations throughout the world to join us in demanding:

- *The immediate intervention of the United Nations to secure the reopening of all universities, colleges, and schools in the Israeli-occupied territories.

- *The removal from the Israeli military government of authority over services to the Palestinian population under Israeli occupation.

- *An interim arrangement, under the auspices of the United Nations or another neutral body, for the protection of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the supervision of services, until a permanent solution can be achieved.

Activities

On the whole, university activities throughout this period remain “traditional” in nature, which faculty and staff engaged in pre-uprising activities. Such actions are assertions of the universities’ continued existence in the face of Israeli measures, rather than methods of developing alternative modes of education. Faculty members, when they are able to obtain permission to travel from the authorities, continue to attend international conferences and build links with foreign universities and academics; Birzeit University held its annual International Summer Program, with tens of students from Europe and the United States in

attendance; and makeshift administrative offices have been set up. Al-Najah, Bethlehem, and Birzeit universities have taken the lead in this respect; the other West Bank universities and the Islamic University in Gaza appear to be barely functioning at all. The only sign of life from Hebron Polytechnic is a conference on the uprising sponsored by the Hebron University Graduates Association to be held this fall.

Bethlehem University is actively engaged in faculty development programs, such as workshops on the use of audio-visual equipment and computers, and has maintained its twinning program with the University College of Dublin. Linked to this is a socioeconomic household survey of villages in the Bethlehem area. The data are being analyzed in Ireland, and the survey is meant to be a prototype for others of its kind.

Birzeit is studying the potential problems of the recently graduated high school seniors who will be college freshmen. Given the disruption of the past school year, committees have been formed to prepare diagnostic tests and remedial courses. Birzeit has also decided to change its university calendar, moving from the semester to the quarter system, giving more intensive courses in a shorter period. Both these steps, however, are aimed at coping with the situation when the universities reopen. Bethlehem appears to be the only university actively pursuing possible education systems to be implemented during the closure. According to Dean of Students Mano Hassassian, following a one-week workshop in May, a majority of faculty decided to pursue variants on the idea of an open university, using hours instead of the credit system, and focusing on social sciences. Members of the university travelled to Great Britain to consult about such programs with experts there.

Graduating Seniors

Seniors are particularly hard hit by the closure of universities. Many had previous plans for graduate school or employment and are now unable to pursue their careers. In March, Bethlehem University began holding courses for seniors in homes of teachers and students, graduating forty in all. Birzeit University followed suit, holding home courses for no more than five students per class for those who need nine credits to graduate. The program will end in late August. Al-Najah University began planning a similar program in mid-August, involving 200 students who needed twenty-one credit hours or less to graduate. The three universities note that an important aspect of these programs is the involvement of faculty who had

been inactive during the previous months of closure. No other universities have as yet adopted similar initiatives.

Bethlehem is currently the only university planning to expand such “at-home” teaching: the Academic Council is drawing up a program for teaching second- and third-year students in their home regions. The administration is aware, however, that such a program’s efficacy is limited by the need for more faculty members, transportation facilities, and mobile libraries. At al-Najah University, administrators feel that such alternatives are not feasible, given the constraints of prolonged curfews, the frequent unrest in the Nablus region, and the especially large and dispersed student population.

Detentions

It is extremely difficult for universities to maintain accurate records of student and staff detentions for a number of reasons: the overwhelming number of Palestinians arrested and the consequent overload of the already inadequate Israeli penal system; the problems of communication from region to region, especially from the Gaza Strip and refugee camps under prolonged curfew; the dramatic case overload for attorneys; and the forced reliance by university staff on informal information networks, primarily reports from students and staff already imprisoned. Given these constraints, three West Bank universities estimate the effects of detentions on their communities as follows.

Birzeit University: Since the start of the uprising, Birzeit University has been informed of 116 students and 18 staff members detained or placed under orders restricting their movement. (The university’s Public Relations Office notes that the actual number is probably closer to 200.) Of the 134 total, forty have been placed under administrative detention while only eight others have been charged and sentenced—a pattern that holds among the population as a whole. An overwhelming number are from villages (48.5 percent), with the remainder almost equally divided between towns and refugee camps. All but four of the administrative detainees are being held in the Ansar III prison camp in the Negev. Only one student—a young woman from the Ramallah area, held for 77 days—has been actually charged and acquitted. Three members of the teaching faculty are currently detained: Taysir ‘Aruri and Nicola Dabit of the Physics Department, and Samir Shihadah of the Arabic Department.

Al-Najah University: The university knows of sixty-one administrative detainees from its student body; of these, fifty-three are being held in Ansar

III, and eight in Junayd prison near Nablus. Seven staff members have been arrested, including four lecturers. At a minimum, at least 200 students are estimated to have been detained during the uprising. Virtually the entire student council, except for one or possibly two members, is in prison. Statistics are particularly difficult to obtain at al-Najah, as so many of the students are from small villages and refugee camps, and there is not the same network of sympathetic attorneys that exists for universities located nearer to Jerusalem.

Bethlehem University: Out of a student body of 1600, approximately 200 students have been detained, totalling 12.5 percent of the total enrollment. Detainees are mainly from Duhayshah and other Bethlehem area camps, and from villages surrounding Hebron in the south. The case of Professor Jad Ishaq, dean of science, is of special concern to educators and community workers. He was arrested and placed under administrative detention in early July, together with eight members of Bayt Sahur's popular committee. Ishaq was targeted by the military authorities because of his involvement in advocating "kitchen gardens" for self-sufficiency. However, the day of his arrest was marked by several hundred Bayt Sahur residents turning in their identity cards to the Israeli authorities in protest against the forced collection of taxes. Ishaq had been attempting to mediate between demonstrators at the city hall and the army when he was himself arrested.

Statistics of those detained from other universities in the West Bank and Gaza are not available. One can assume, however, that they are similar to those above and reflect the same major trends: a preponderance of detainees from small villages, increasing numbers of administrative detainees, and a minority of cases where individuals have actually been charged, let alone brought to trial.

Deportations

The Israeli Defense Ministry took the unprecedented step of serving deportation orders against twenty-five Palestinians on 17 August. Among the twenty-five are two members of Birzeit University. Taysir 'Aruri is a 42-year-old lecturer in Physics and a father of three. He was held in administrative detention from 1974 until 1978, and was declared an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience. 'Abd al-Hamid al-Baba is a 25-year-old fourth year chemistry student. Both are alleged to have participated in the popular committees set up during the uprising to offer health and welfare services to Palestinian communities, and to ensure their safety from Israeli assault.

In a 20 August press release, Birzeit University notes: "Neither Taysir nor 'Abd al-Hamid will have the opportunity to defend himself. Deportation is an administrative, not a judicial procedure; the accusations against deportees are not submitted to a court of law. Furthermore, the appeals procedure is nothing but a rubber stamp for expulsion. Both Taysir and 'Abd al-Hamid, as well as all other deportees, face a future in exile, torn from family, loved ones, friends, and their homeland."

Al-Najah University has been particularly hard hit by the wave of deportations, with five members of the university community deported during the uprising; their most recent deportee is student Lu'ay Abdu of Nablus, deported on 1 August, a few days after the birth of his first child. Another student, Taysir Nasrallah, is on the list of twenty-five served with deportation orders. Ahmad Abu Ma'alik, a student at Gaza's Islamic University, was among 4 Gazans deported on 17 August, and a lecturer, 'Abdallah Abu Samhadani, is on the latest list. Also among those deported on 1 August was Ahmad Jabir, an employee of Birzeit University's Literacy Unit.

Schools

On 17 May, the Civil Administration announced the phased reopening of schools in the West Bank, closed by military order for nearly four months. At the same time, the military spokesman noted: "Universities, which have traditionally been a hotbed of anti-Israeli protest, will remain closed" (*Jerusalem Post*, 5/18/88). Rumors abounded that the authorities had decided to reopen the schools out of concern over the spread of the alternative popular education in many towns and villages, and the threat such initiatives pose to the occupation's authority.

As schools reopened, evidence of army vandalism in over 31 school buildings in the West Bank was discovered. Joel Greenberg of the *Jerusalem Post* wrote: "Reporters visiting the Khalduniya school in Nablus . . . saw broken windows, desks, chairs, and closets; anti-Arab graffiti and insignias of IDF units painted on and cut into walls; broken laboratory equipment and excrement in the bathrooms and adjacent rooms" (*Jerusalem Post*, 24 May 1988).

Army patrols, provocatively posted near the entrances of schools, soon clashed frequently with students. Worried parents tried to transport their young children in safety, while the authorities began to shut schools for days at a time throughout this period. On 12 July, six schools were closed until the end of the year; twenty-three more were closed on 15 July, and the rest

on 21 July—about a month earlier than the official end of the semester. This erratic schedule severely disrupted the ability of local committees to provide popular education, because mobilization for such alternative classes is highest when schools are definitively closed.

With schools open only until noon each day, high school seniors had only two and one-half months to cover four months of material for their *tawjihi* exams. At the last moment, the exams in the West Bank were cancelled, with the Jordanian education authorities agreeing to multiply the score of the first semester exams by two for a final score. In Gaza, *tawjihi* exams were held in late June, at a time when some 127,000 residents of Burayj, Jabalya, Beach, and Khan Yunis camps were under curfew; students were allowed to leave the camps between the hours of 6 and 7 am, under the watchful eyes of the army.

On 19 August, the Civil Administration announced it would not reopen West Bank public schools in September. Private schools and schools ran by UNRWA will be allowed to open a month late, on 1 October. Universities will remain closed (*Jerusalem Post*, 19 August 1988). There is now an entire class of graduated high school seniors with no open universities to attend, and a generation of Palestinian youth being denied their right to education.

Relationship with Jordan

Jordan's decision to redefine its relationship with the West Bank is widely considered to be a major achievement of the uprising, though some express concern over the effect on the ground, especially regarding services and financial matters. Given the use of the Jordanian curriculum and *tawjihi*, secondary, preparatory, and elementary schools face the most potentially meaningful changes. University administrators claim that any ramifications for them should be negligible, as financial and other affairs are coordinated here by the Council for Higher Education.