**Palestinian Universities on the Frontline**

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By Sam Bahour

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| [On display at the Bethlehem Museum, the abacusis a simple, but yet piercing piece of art reflecting what Palestinian kids aregoing through under military occupation. Palestinian Artist Rana Bishara fromTarshiha in the Western Galilee. (October, 2016) Printed with permission ofartist.](http://bit.ly/palestinian-universities)  |

Palestinian universities are fighting an uphill battle on two fronts, one being the Israeli military occupation, and more recently, the other being the Palestinian government. Although each poses two very different sets of challenges, one outcome is clear. If immediate and decisive intervention is not forthcoming, the structural damage that will set back entire generations of Palestinian students will haunt Palestine’s developmental capabilities for many years to come. That is, if the damage has not already been inflicted.

Prolonged Israeli military occupation of Palestine (West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip) has caused a staggering amount of damage to the Palestinian society at large. Much of this damage is visible to the naked eye, such as land grabs, settlements, walls, fences, checkpoints, demolished airports, and bombed-out buildings, just to name a few. However, the more serious and long-term damage is hidden from view. I call it the administratively applied part of the Israeli military occupation. These invisible aspects of the occupation comprise issues such as the infamous permit system, the limiting and prohibiting of access to the electromagnetic spectrum, confiscation of water resources, severely limiting Palestinians’ access to water, and importation restrictions. The list is long.

These are the elements of occupation you cannot capture in a photo. One of the key elements Israel has routinely sought to attack is Palestine’s education system. The Israeli fixation on blocking Palestinian education is not new.

When Israel was yet in its formative years, it introduced an office of the advisor to the [Israeli] prime minister on Arab affairs. As quoted in Atty. Sabri Jiryis’ landmark book, “*The Arabs in Israel*” (1976), one of the most racist persons to hold this position was Uri Lubrani (1960-1963). Lubrani stated in a lecture, “It very probably would be better if there were no Arab university students. It probably would be easier to govern them if they continued to work as wood cutters and waiters.” It seems this desire has not faded away.

Earlier this month, Muwatin Institute for Democracy andHuman Rights, a Palestinian research group which recently became affiliated with Birzeit University, held its 22nd Annual Conference titled, “The Complex Challenges Facing Palestinian Universities: Is There a Way Out?” The conference was held at Birzeit University on September 30 and October 1, 2016. The Muwatin Conference came on the heels of a provocative student strike at Birzeit University, which witnessed a handful of students forcibly chain closed the gates of the university, totally paralyzing the university for nearly a month and delaying the start of the school year. There is no indication that the situation has stabilized to prohibit the students (or teachers’/workers’ unions) from undertaking future disruptive labor action. The backdrop of this strike made the Muwatin Conference even more timely.

The conference brought together an impressive audience of senior academics, education administrators, including several current and past university presidents, private sector concerns, and Palestinian government officials, including the current Minister of Education and Higher Education, Dr. Sabri Saidam, as well as several ex-ministers. The panels hosted some of the top Palestinian thinkers on higher education.

One panel, Higher Education: Continuation or Start Over?, offered an historical overview of the young Palestinian higher education sector. Another panel, Where Does Higher Education Stand in Palestine?, grappled with the need to educate for the sake of education, as well as to educate to serve a productive labor market, one that is extremely distressed by prolonged occupation. Other panels were titled Self-Restricting Constraints on Higher Education, University Economics and Country Economics, Higher Education Under Occupation, The Regulatory Framework for Higher Education, and Higher Education and State Building. Having listened attentively to them all, the overarching messages were loud and clear: our higher education system remains in the crosshairs of the Israeli occupation, and the Palestinian government, with its deep financial constraints and lack of legislative oversight, is unable to stop the imminent damage on its own.

From the Israeli side, the damage to the higher education sector is systemic. Physical targeting of university facilities, as was the case at the Islamic University in the Gaza Strip, and frequent incursions on to campuses, as was recently the case at the Palestine Technical University (Kadoorie) located in Tulkarm and Birzeit University near Ramallah, have brought material damage and disruption to university operations. Additionally, the heavy restrictions Israel has placed on Palestinians’ movement and access have forced universities to be established near the students, bringing the total [number of universities to 15](http://www.mohe.pna.ps/institutionsofhe) for a population of 4.8 million with over 120,000 university students, with three new private universities in the pipeline. This forced geographic fragmenting of our community is not only draining material resources, but it is cannibalizing the shrinking pool of qualified university professors, especially those holding PhDs. Just last month, [Israel denied entry into the country to UK-based scholar Dr. Adam Hanieh](http://www.birzeit.edu/en/news/birzeit-university-condemns-denial-entry-uk-academic), who was invited by the Ph.D. Program in the Social Sciences at Birzeit University to deliver a series of lectures at the university. He is not the first case of an academic being denied access. The number of Israeli restrictions and disruptions is too long to list here.

On the side of the Palestinian government, the criticism was pointed. The inability of the government to meet its financial commitments to universities was highlighted by almost every panelist, especially given the over 40 percent budget allocation that goes toward security. Another alarming issue brought up by many was the issue that the Palestinian security forces have “infiltrated” the universities and are seen as hindering the academic freedoms students expect. This criticism was exacerbated by the fact that, as of late, the Palestinian security forces have arrested and interrogated many student activists.

The Muwatin Conference distributed a booklet titled, “Higher Education in Palestine…Beyond the Figures!!!” I think the three explanation points in the booklet’s title speak for themselves. Nevertheless, reading the set of statistics presented, from the rising unemployment rates, to the declining interest in sciences, to the inability of the labor market to absorb the nearly 40,000 annual graduates, it becomes apparent that the situation is reaching a tipping point and the spillover, when it occurs, will not remain confined behind campus walls.

It was refreshing, albeit depressing, to hear the case made by Dr. Samia Botmeh, Assistant Professor of Economics at Birzeit University, about the negative effect that neo-liberalism is having on Palestine’s higher education system. She made a convincing argument that higher education cannot merely be reduced to providing job skills to serve a market (something she called the “productization” of education), but rather must be viewed from a much broader societal vantage point where a higher education is instilling a set of values and skills to produce a life-long learner who has the ability to assume his or her role in society, be it in serving a business, engaging a philosophical dilemma, producing music, or being a homemaker.

One missing aspect of the conference that I have interest in was how to utilize our diaspora, academics and non-academics, to support the higher education of Palestinians, as well as Palestinian higher education institutes. A week before the conference, my consulting firm launched a Linkedin Group, [Academic Network for Palestine (ANPs)](https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12008701), to start to collect in one location those Palestinian academics and non-Palestinian academics who are in solidarity with Palestine to discuss ways to support the sector.

Ironically, as I was writing this article, my 11th-grade daughter, Nadine, came to me with her laptop in hand. She enthusiastically wanted me to watch something. It was this, [THE PEOPLE VS THE SCHOOL SYSTEM](https://youtu.be/dqTTojTija8), a YouTube clip by American rapper, spoken word artist, music video director and rights activist from St Louis, Missouri, Richard Williams, better known by his stage name Prince EA. Nadine’s timing was spot on.

Palestine’s challenge is huge. As this video clip by Prince EA so eloquently articulates, we must deal with the same mega-challenges that the entire world is dealing with, the only difference is we must do so while the oppressive boot of Israeli military occupation is pressing on our necks. Ignoring desperately needed reforms and freedoms in Palestine’s education system levies a heavy price on students and the society at large. As Palestinian educators struggle to survive, our Israeli occupier is laughing all the way to the next settlement hilltop.

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