

‘Scholasticide: Israel’s attempt to destroy Palestine’s universities’

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Supporters of the academic boycott of Israel are frequently told it’s wrong in principle to boycott universities since they are bastions of free speech, and it’s downright perverse to boycott Israeli universities since they are islands of liberal opinion in an otherwise reactionary country.

Neither claim bears scrutiny. Boycott supporters do not boycott individuals but institutions, and do not obstruct anyone’s free speech. By boycotting, they are expressing their disgust at the complicity of Israeli universities in the plight of their Palestinian counterparts behind the Apartheid wall. Most Israeli faculty and students will have served in the IDF and participated in the illegal occupation, and many are still in the army reserve. Much of the research for their instruments of oppression are carried out at their own universities.

Not only do Palestinian universities have practically no friends in Israel, they have long been targets of Israeli hostility, and this year the hostility has sharply intensified. Daphna Golan recently wrote in [Haaretz](#) of ‘the destruction of the Palestinian universities’. This is no exaggeration. To make sense of Israel’s action, a brief history of the relationship may be helpful.

Establishing Palestinian universities

Before 1967 there were no universities in Palestine, only a single private agricultural college. Young people seeking higher education went to universities in Beirut, Cairo, Amman or

further abroad. It was only after the 1967 war that Palestinians began to turn schools into colleges and colleges into universities. This was partly because Israel restricted the movement of people in and out of Palestine. But it was also because Palestinians knew that to resist Israel's efforts to destroy them as a nation, they must educate their people, increase their skills and sustain their national culture.

First came Birzeit (formerly a two-year college) in 1972, then Bethlehem (an expansion of the Christian Brothers campus) in 1973, then An-Najah in 1977, the Islamic University in Gaza in 1978, Hebron in 1982, Al-Quds (amalgamating four separate colleges) in 1984, and Al-Azhar in 1992. Today there are 14 degree-giving institutions in the West Bank and 9 in the Gaza Strip as well as several colleges. Student enrolment has correspondingly risen: from a few hundred in 1973 to c.80,000 in 2001, and well over 200,000 today – with 70,000 enrolled in the Palestine Open University and more studying abroad.

Israeli malevolence

From the start Israel has regarded Palestinian universities as centres for political resistance to their imperialist project – what an [Israeli minister](#) recently called ‘greenhouses for growing terrorists.’ So they put innumerable obstacles in their way.

In the early years, Israel refused to exempt construction materials, laboratory equipment and books destined for the universities from customs duties, VAT and even in some cases luxury taxes – contrary to international law. It censored books and periodicals which were freely available at Israeli universities. It withheld work permits for international faculty – and bear in

mind that after the Naqba most Palestinians were driven into exile. Israel also regularly and arbitrarily closed the universities [down](#).

In 1973, just as Birzeit was becoming a full-fledged university, Israeli authorities closed it down and did so several more times in the next few years. In 1974, they arrested and deported the president of Birzeit University, [Dr. Hanna Nasir](#), to Lebanon. For the next nineteen years he presided over the University while in exile.

University closures, initially for a few days or a week, in the 1980s commonly became a month or several months long. In 1986-7 Israeli forces shot and killed students at Birzeit University. They closed the university four times, on one occasion for four months, and carried out two large-scale military incursions into the campus.

In February 1988, just weeks after the first Intifada began, [Israel shut down the universities](#) along with all other Palestinian schools. Hundreds and eventually thousands of students were arrested without charge or trial, as well as dozens of faculty. In the case of faculty it was usually for attempting to teach in mosques, churches and private homes, which Israel criminalised. In the case of students it was usually because they were carrying academic books, which was taken as a sign of rebellion.

As always, Israel's justification was security: Palestinian universities were allegedly sites of '[popular terror and rioting](#)'. But the fact that it closed not only the universities but also secondary schools, primary schools and even kindergartens put the lie to its 'security' claims. To suggest that kindergartens were

hotbeds of terror was so absurd that it backtracked and allowed them to reopen – but not the universities, which remained closed for over four years.

Eventually in 1984 Israel allowed the universities to reopen, but continued its policy of obstruction. In 2000 it restricted the movement of students to and from the Gaza Strip – part of its separation policy. During Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09 it deliberately bombed and destroyed the Ministry of Education in Gaza and much of the Islamic University.

Down to the present the IDF regularly launches armed incursions into Palestinian universities, disrupting teaching, trashing offices and destroying equipment. In 2013 alone, the IDF invaded Al Quds University no fewer than 26 times and injured over 1,700 students and staff, mainly by wantonly firing off smoke and tear gas grenades. At any one time, Israel holds between 300 and 500 Palestinian students and dozens of faculty in [detention](#), usually without charge.

The bantustanisation of Palestinian universities

Israel forces erect hundreds of checkpoints, some temporary, some permanent, making travel in the West Bank uncertain. As a result, universities even just 30 kilometres apart have had to abandon sharing lecturers and courses.

Some permanent checkpoints close at 6 p.m. and don't reopen until the following morning. As a result, the universities can't schedule activities after 5 or 5:30 p.m., since otherwise students and staff might not get home.

Since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, it has been totally cut off from the rest of Palestine, and Gaza students are

no longer able to study in West Bank universities. At Birzeit, for instance, Gaza students made up 20 per cent of the student body in the first fifteen years of its operations; today, Birzeit has no students from Gaza.

It is not only Gaza that is isolated. An-Najah University in Nablus enrolled large numbers of students from the governorates of Jenin as well as Tulkarm and Tubas until 10 years ago. Now, because of the checkpoints and arbitrary road closures, the number of students attending An-Najah from Jenin has declined almost to zero. The national role of the universities is thus undermined.

Israel controls everything the Palestinian universities receive from abroad. It regularly blocks the imports of scientific equipment, chemical supplies, books in Arabic, even books on art and art history; and it delays delivering goods for months, sometimes years.

Israel frequently places obstacles in the way of students and faculty seeking to leave or return to the West Bank. The complete uncertainty makes it hard for Palestinian academics to organise international conferences or attend conferences abroad.

Palestinian universities generally don't have the resources to put on masters or doctoral programs. Most students seeking a postgraduate qualification must therefore go abroad. But if they stay abroad for more than a year they face the threat that Israel will declare they have forfeited their residence status and refuse to allow them back.

Israel also makes it difficult for the universities to receive visiting lecturers. They delay the issue of visas or issue visas too short to cover the time required for the visit.

Israel's intensified repression

This year Israel has turned the screws even further on Palestinian universities. In July it halted a two-day conference in East Jerusalem on the status of Muslim endowment and property in the occupied city. Gilad Erdan, the Israeli minister of public security who ordered the halt, claimed the conference promoted [‘incitement’](#) against the Israeli state. The conference was to take place at Al-Quds University’s Hind al-Husseini College of Arts in Sheikh Jarrah. Israel not only stopped the conference from going ahead. It also detained 15 of the participants and permanently [shut down](#) the College. Presumably this is part of Israel’s long-term plan to drive the Palestinians completely out of Jerusalem.

Israel has also persuaded the US to cut funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA), claiming it is ‘strengthening terror’ - by helping to educate Palestinians. As well as providing teaching and teacher training for many primary and secondary schools in the West Bank and Gaza, [UNWRA](#) issues over 1000 scholarships to Palestinian students.

Most serious of all, Israel is now [refusing](#) to renew the visas of academics in Palestine who do not hold permanent residency in the West Bank. According to the Palestinian civil affairs commission, the Israeli visa renewal rate for these academics has dropped from 70 percent to [10 percent](#) over the past year. Israeli authorities impose unwritten, unclear and changing

documentation requirements, drag out the processing time, offer only shorter duration visas and stamps that restrict movement to the West Bank, and demand financial bonds that can reach up to [\\$22,000](#). Non-resident academics must submit their work contract to obtain a visa which states ‘not allowed to work.’ Until this year, non-Palestinian non-resident academics could transit through Ben Gurion Airport. Not anymore.

Most of those affected are Palestinians whose families fled abroad in 1948 and who hold foreign passports rather than Palestinian residence permits. At Birzeit University alone there are 15 foreign passport-holding faculty members whose requests for visa renewals have been refused or endlessly delayed. Some of them have already had to leave the country.

Two such victims are [Roger Heacock](#) and his wife, Laura Wick. They have both worked at Birzeit for 35 years, he a professor of European history, she a specialist in mid-wifery and public health. They have had to quit their posts, sell or give away their possessions, and are now waiting in France in hope that the Israelis will eventually let them return.

Academics like the Heacocks play a critical role in Palestinian higher education. Forcing them to leave further isolates the universities from the rest of the world, reduces the quality of education they provide, demoralises those who are left, and discourages others from staying on in Palestine. That, it seems safe to say, is precisely why the Israelis are refusing to renew their visas.

The logic of repression and means of resistance

To sum up, Israel's obstruction of Palestinian higher education cannot be explained simply by reference to 'security'. Israel places a high value on its universities and research institutes, regarding them as vital to its economic, cultural and national survival, given that practically its only natural resources are its people. Israel knows well that universities play the same essential role in Palestinian society. It also knows that an empowered Palestinian population is far more capable of challenging its dominance than an ill-informed, poorly educated one. This, no doubt, is the reason for Israel's relentless targeting of the Palestinian educational system. It is scarcely hyperbole to describe Israeli policy as [scholasticide](#).

So far, Palestine has been remarkably successful in educating its people, despite Israeli obstacles. A few statistics tell the story:

- about one-third of all Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are enrolled in education at all levels.
- according to a report of the UN Development Program in 2016, the [literacy](#) rate in Palestine - 96.3% - is the highest in the Middle East, and the [illiteracy](#) rate among Palestinians over the age of 15 – 3.7% - is the lowest in the world.
- compared to Israel, Palestine has a [similar percentage](#) of young people - and a similar percentage of young women - in higher education.

But the situation is precarious. Western university heads loudly protest against the academic boycott of Israel, but say nothing when Israel bombs Palestinian universities or cripples their operations. Western governments fold their arms and do nothing. Israeli universities, as ever, remain silent. The plight of the West Bank and Gaza universities will therefore continue to

worsen, and Israel will eventually destroy them if nothing is done. Civil society action must therefore act.

- Students should work within their respective PalSocs to inform other students of what is going on and help prepare the next Israel Apartheid Week.

- Alumni should pressure their respective university to take an interest in this injustice. Partnerships with a Palestinian university are one option.

- University teachers should press their union, UCU, to act on the motions on Palestine adopted at conference. If they haven't done so already, they should sign the [Commitment by UK Scholars to Human Rights in Palestine](#).

- Everyone wishing to know more or become involved should follow the links to '[Right to Education Campaign](#)', an initiative of students at Birzeit University, the '[Campaign for the Right to Enter the Occupied Palestinian Territory \(OPT\)](#)', and the [British Committee for the Universities of Palestine \(BRICUP\)](#), all of which have advice on appropriate action.

A version of this talk was given on 3 November at the Chester Stop the War Conference on 'Palestine: Reframing the Debate'