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Free to Think 2020

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Free to Think 2020 **analyzes 341 attacks on higher education communities in 58 countries between September 1, 2019 and August 31, 2020.**

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The report draws on data from SAR's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project and identifies trends related to attacks on higher education communities, including **violent attacks on campuses** in Afghanistan, India, and Yemen; **wrongful imprisonments and prosecutions** of scholars; **restrictions on academic travel**, deployed most prominently by authorities in Israel, Turkey, and the United States; **pressures on student expression** included sustained pressures in Colombia, India, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and South Africa; and **legislative and administrative threats to university autonomy**, including in Brazil, Ghana, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Turkey. The report provides detailed analysis of pressures on national and regional higher education communities, including:

7. Wrongful Imprisonment and Prosecution of Scholars

In the **Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)**, on November 13, Israeli military officers detained without charge **Ubai Aboudi**, a Palestinian-American political economist, researcher, and the director of the Bisan Center for Research and Development in Ramallah, which produces research and policy papers on education, development, democracy, and environmentalism in the OPT (*AFMI 1030*). Authorities conducted a raid on Aboudi's home, confiscated his mobile phone and US passport, detained him, and transferred him to Ofer prison. Five days after his arrest, Aboudi was placed in administrative detention for two months.[103] Authorities detained Aboudi roughly two months before the third annual meeting of Scientists for Palestine—an organization devoted to integrating the OPT into the international scientific community—was set to take place at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US. Aboudi was reportedly a key organizer of the meeting and had recently been working on enhancing Palestinian education in the STEM fields.

Another member of Scientists for Palestine, **Imad Barghouthi**, was arrested by Israeli authorities on July 16, 2020 (*AFMI 1215*). Barghouthi, a renowned professor of Theoretical Space Plasma Physics at Al-Quds University, was returning to his home in Ramallah when Israeli soldiers stopped him at a military checkpoint outside Jerusalem and put him under administrative detention. Two weeks later, he was reportedly charged with "incitement" in connection with alleged social media activity. Barghouti has been arrested on two previous occasions, in 2014 and 2016, also in connection with expressive activity. On September 2, a court granted Barghouthi bail; however, this decision was immediately followed by an order by Israeli military authorities to put him under administrative detention until November 15. Barghouthi has reportedly been denied communication with his spouse and daughter while in custody.

9. Global Threats to Student Expression

Occupied Palestinian Territories

The 2019-2020 academic year in the West Bank began with apparently heightened reports of Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the Israeli military, carrying out arrests and raids that targeted students, particularly those affiliated with on-campus organizations. Student councils and other student organizations on Palestinian university campuses often serve as crucial venues for young Palestinians to voice concerns and opinions on politics and other important matters.

Many of those taken into Israeli custody, including the individuals described in this section, were put under administrative detention, a procedure under Israeli military law permitting the incarceration of an individual without trial or charge for up to six months, with the possibility of renewal, based on undisclosed evidence that they intended to commit a crime. While these tactics are not new—the use of raids and administrative detention to target Palestinian students and scholars has been a routine practice for years—the heightened crackdown just prior to and during this reporting period warrants discussion.

According to the Right to Education Campaign (RtEC), a grassroots movement committed to documenting, researching and raising awareness about threats to Palestinian students, teachers, and higher education institutions, more than 74 Birzeit University students were detained by IDF forces between July 2019 and January 2020.[148] The US-based Middle East Studies Association, citing Palestinian sources, suggested that as many as three hundred Palestinian students may be in custody, according to a public letter the association issued on June 19, 2020.[149] Reports suggest that students from Birzeit University were particularly targeted during this past academic year.

On August 29, 2019, for example, IDF soldiers raided the home of **Mays Abu Ghosh**, a media and journalism student at Birzeit University. Abu Ghosh was detained allegedly in connection with her affiliation with the student activist group al-Qutub.[150] Abu Ghosh was reportedly subjected to judicial and custodial mistreatment after being detained. On May 3, 2020, an Israeli military court convicted her of "affiliation to an illegal organization" and "communication with an enemy party," in apparent connection to her student group affiliations. She was sentenced to 16 months' imprisonment, an additional 12-month suspended prison sentence, and issued a fine of 2,000 Israeli Shekels (roughly USD $575).

Just over a week after the raid on Abu Ghosh's home, IDF soldiers targeted another Birzeit student, **Samah Jaradat** (*AFMI 973*). Jaradat, who had graduated only days earlier, was detained in a raid on her family's home. Israeli forces reportedly subjected Jaradat to a strip search, lengthy interrogations, torture, and denied her access to counsel while in custody. Seven months later, on June 4, 2020, Israeli authorities released Jaradat. She was reportedly detained in connection to her membership on the Birzeit University student council.

On December 12, IDF soldiers arrested **Shatha Hasan**, a student of psychology and the president of Birzeit's student council (*AFMI 1056*). The arrest occurred during a raid on Hasan's home in Ramallah. Five days later, on December 17, an Israeli military court sentenced Hasan to three months' imprisonment on an administrative detention order.

The secretary of the planning committee for Birzeit's student council, **Yahya Sadiq al-Qarout**, was detained by Israeli forces during a June 4, 2020, raid on his home (*AFMI 1188*). Few details are available regarding the detention of al-Qarout, who reportedly has no prior arrest history.

And on July 9, IDF soldiers detained Birzeit student **Ruba Assi,** also during an overnight raid on her home in Ramallah (*AFMI 1211*). As many as 18 individuals were reportedly detained in nearby raids that same night.

The arrests have sparked protests demanding the release of these and other detained students. On October 5, 2019, for example, students gathered on the Birzeit University campus and marched to Ofar Prison. The students protested peacefully, chanting slogans and holding signs; however, as the students continued to make their way to the prison, Israeli troops reportedly launched tear gas in an effort to disperse them (*AFMI 993*).

The detentions of Palestinian students and student leaders appear to be part of an effort by Israeli authorities to quash organizing or political activity that could question Israel's occupation. Students should not have to fear detention or other coercive actions because of their identity, nonviolent academic or expressive activity, opinions, or associations.

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