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Higher Education as Empowerment

The Case of Palestinian Universities

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Palestinian universities have been a dynamic force across Palestinian communities since their inception under Israeli occupation in the early 1970s. What began as initiatives of private families or religious foundations to provide local access to higher education soon grew into a widespread presence across Palestinian communities that has had a profound impact on Palestinian national identity and the persistence of Palestine as a nation. This study specifically argues that Palestinian universities have provided Palestinian communities with the physical and conceptual space to sustain the nation of Palestine by enabling Palestinians to define and articulate a Palestinian national identity, engage in resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and build the nation of Palestine in the absence of a Palestinian state. This study considers the case of Palestinian universities in an effort to shed light on what enables the university to consistently contribute to the human experience over time and across space.

Keywords: higher education; Palestinian; Intifada; Israel; empowerment

Palestinian universities have been a dynamic force in shaping Palestinian communities since their inception under Israeli occupation in the early 1970s. What began as initiatives of private families or religious foundations to provide local access to higher education grew into a presence that has had a profound impact on Palestinian communities. What has been the impact of these institutions and how are we to explain their influence on Palestinian communities? This article argues that Palestinian universities have empowered Palestinian communities to (a) define and articulate a Palestinian national identity, (b) resist the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and (c) prepare for a Palestinian state. It looks at Palestinian universities in an effort to shed light on the relationship between universities and social and political change and specifically poses the question, What enables the university to serve as a vehicle of community empowerment?

My long-standing engagement with the people of Palestine coupled with my exploration of the historical context of Palestine has enabled me to identify three key periods in the history of Palestinian universities: (a) Palestinian universities as bearers of national consciousness, from 1967 to 1986; (b) Palestinian universities as centers of

resistance, from 1987 to 1992; and (c) Palestinian universities as contributors to state formation, from 1993 to 2000. These three periods range from the emergence of Palestinian universities in the early 1970s through the eve of the second Intifada in 2000. My historical analysis considers the challenges Palestinians faced in each period and the ways in which Palestinian universities empowered Palestinian communities to confront those challenges. I then consider what enables the university to serve as a vehicle of community empowerment to expand our knowledge of the university as a contributor to social and political change.

The Palestinian context provides a unique manifestation of the university in that Palestinian universities serve as national institutions in the absence of a Palestinian state. The Palestinian communities they serve remain subject to the state of Israel, although the institutions themselves are independent of that state. Practically speaking, however, they, too, are subject to the state of Israel to the extent that Israel has the ability to interfere with their operation by controlling the movement of Palestinians to and from these institutions and by blocking expansion of and resources to the universities. In other contexts, universities are either administered by the state or at least enjoy an integral relationship with the state. Palestinian universities exist in opposition to the state, that is to Israel, because the state of Israel continues to challenge the expression of Palestinian identity within a Palestinian state. Moreover, the enormous challenges Palestinian universities face and the subsequent transformation of these institutions during a relatively short period of time provide a rich field in which to explore the transformative power of the university.

Palestinian Universities as Bearers of National Consciousness, 1967 to 1986

The first period of Palestinian universities spans from the Six-Day War in 1967 to the eve of the first Intifada in 1986. The 1967 War resulted in the incorporation of the remainder of Palestinians under Israeli state power with the occupation of the rest of historic Palestine. These events posed a challenge to Palestinian identity and became the impetus for the emergence of Palestinian institutions that enabled Palestinians to express their identity and represent their interests. Numerous formal and informal organizations emerged after 1967 in part to provide badly needed services to Palestinian communities. Organizations included educational, research, charitable, and human rights organizations as well as trade unions, women's committees, and voluntary work committees. However, the primary Palestinian institution to emerge following the 1967 War was the university.

During this period, a total of six Palestinian universities emerged throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.¹ First and foremost, they provided local access to higher education for Palestinians who previously had to travel to Egypt, Syria, or Jordan in the Arab world or to Europe or abroad to the United States or Canada to pursue higher education, a privilege that could typically be enjoyed by only the wealthiest families (Graham-Brown, 1984). Families of more modest means withstood great

financial hardship to send their children to the university. The poorest families would send only one son in the hope that he would bring the family greater prosperity. For Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, access to Israeli universities was and remains limited because of the challenges of a culturally biased school curriculum in favor of Israel's Jewish citizens that prevents Palestinian students from acquiring the necessary "cultural capital" to gain access to these institutions (Abu-Saad, 2001).

The proximity of Palestinian universities to Palestinian population centers within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip not only provided Palestinian students with local access to higher education but also enabled Palestinian youth to stay on Palestinian soil. As the vice president of one Palestinian university explained, Palestinian universities contributed indirectly to local economic development because money was kept inside, making higher education "an investment in the country" (personal communication, August 2000). Studying at home also greatly increased the chances of Palestinians being able to contribute locally to their communities because Israeli policy, which at times blocked students' return from abroad, combined with the pressure to provide for their families might otherwise have kept them in exile.

The establishment of Palestinian universities is, in part, attributed to the desire to establish national institutions that would not be considered a threat to the state of Israel. In fact, Palestinian universities emerged at a time when Israel blocked the development of other national institutions (Frisch, 1998). The relatively high number of Palestinian universities today is a direct reflection of the circumstances under which they came into being. The state of Israel imposed restrictions on the formation of Palestinian national institutions within Israeli-controlled areas and did not allow political organizations. The state of Israel also forbade official expressions of Palestinian identity, such as wearing the colors of the Palestinian flag or referring to the land as Palestine, up through the early 1990s. As one former student explained,

Any combination of the colors of the Palestinian flag was illegal. Students were arrested if they were caught with a Palestinian flag in their possession. They could get anywhere from 6 months to 2 years in prison for possessing a Palestinian flag. Raising the flag at the demonstration was a big undertaking and the ultimate expression of identity as far as we were concerned. (personal communication, February 2003)

Moreover, restrictions on movement prevented any centralized institutional capacity to serve a representative function among Palestinians under Israeli rule. The cumulative impact of these restrictions encouraged the establishment of multiple universities throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and, thus, one by one, they emerged as private initiatives beginning in the early 1970s (Assaf, 1997).

The symbolic power of Palestinian universities as "national" institutions coupled with their capacity to provide Palestinians with services extended their role beyond education to bearers of national consciousness by enabling Palestinians to engage with each other to reflect on their shared experience of displacement, dispossession, and exile. Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi (1997) pointed out that 1948 and beyond marked a period that "cemented and universalized a common identity as Pal-

estinians . . . crowning it with this series of unforgettable shared experiences” (p. 194). The expression of Palestinian national consciousness sent a message of the legitimacy of Palestinian identity to the state of Israel and the world.

The emergence of Palestinian universities linked the desire for self-expression with a medium for self-expression that extended beyond the walls of the institutions. The unique status of Palestinian universities as nonstate institutions and their accessibility to students made them a natural facilitator of national consciousness. These institutions provided Palestinians with a place to come together and share ideas in the process of pursuing higher education. In this respect, Palestinian universities provided a *safe haven* where Palestinians could have access to higher learning and at the same time reflect on what it meant to be Palestinian. The shared understanding that emerged was not something new but rather, the articulation of what Palestinians deeply believed. The public articulation of Palestinian identity gave rise to a national narrative that resonated within Palestinians everywhere because it told their story and expressed their aspirations to live free with dignity in Palestine.

Denial of an institutional base gave rise to traditional cultural symbols as more indirect and acceptable forms of national expression that cut across differences in Palestinian communities and did not pose an overt threat to Israeli authority. Palestinian universities enabled Palestinians to address the Israeli challenge to their identity by collectively developing a national consciousness rooted in traditional Palestinian culture. In the absence of state power or institutional organization, the Palestinian nationalist movement held onto the cultural symbols that resonated with the majority of Palestinians, the rural population of the *fellahin*. The traditional *fellahi* culture carried with it the attachment to land and a timeless indigenous culture (Swedenburg, 1990). This relationship between culture and land remains central to the struggle for legitimacy to this day. Palestinian universities embraced the adoption of traditional symbols as an expression of national culture. For example, Birzeit University adopted the olive tree as its official logo as an integral component of the Palestinian national narrative that spoke to every Palestinian, urban or rural, rich or poor, at home or in exile.

Palestinian universities enabled Palestinians under Israeli occupation to couple Palestinian self-expression with Palestinian *rootedness* to the land of Palestine through its association to specific events or experiences (Feld & Basso, 1996). These Palestinians represented living proof that being Palestinian was not just an identity but also a specific lived experience associated with a particular landscape of which they were still a part. Palestinian students took part in activities that asserted rootedness, such as volunteering to assist villagers throughout the West Bank to harvest olives during the olive season. Students at Palestinian universities also volunteered to plant trees and work the land on Land Day in commemoration of six Palestinian farmers who were killed by Israeli soldiers for their refusal to give up their land after receiving confiscation orders in the village of Sakhnin on March 30, 1976.² Moreover, Palestinian universities became centers of Palestinian folklore. For example, the *dabka* troupe El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe (1982), which remains the most well-known Palestinian folklore group, was established during this period and developed

its choreography and music in part by speaking with villagers about traditional songs and customs that led to themes of traditional village life in their performances, including working the land, fetching water, making bread, and wedding preparations and festivities, as well as resistance and victory.

Thus, the emergence of Palestinian universities provided Palestinians with access to higher education, but more important, it enabled them to reflect on the implications of Israeli occupation of Palestine on their identity as Palestinians in the future. The sacred space of the university empowered students to speak out as Palestinians at a time when it was illegal to utter the word *Palestine*. Palestinian self-expression was reflected in student activism at the universities, which gave local voice to the already established nationalist movement in exile led by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Student movements mirrored the political factions of the PLO in exile, which initially constituted Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Communist Party. A Palestinian activist (personal communication, March 2004) described how students celebrated the anniversaries of these factions with huge processions complete with marching bands followed by lengthy political rallies that included statements from their leadership and statements of solidarity from other factions. He also explained how student groups competed for seats in the student councils based on the political platforms of these factions, which represented different strategies to liberate Palestine. The centrality of student activism is reflected in his words:

Part of the decision of weighing what university to go to was the campus political and activist life. During grade 12 I was among a group of friends who supported the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine [PFLP]. Me and one of my friends were dreaming of going to Birzeit. Back then the PFLP was very strong in Birzeit campus. The activist scene, the international volunteers, the night summer camps, the festivals, the cafeteria discussions together represented an environment we so much wanted to be a part of. (personal communication, March 2004)

Thus, association with the university became synonymous with meaningful activism that was understood to directly contribute to the liberation of Palestine. The liberation of Palestine was the focus of all student groups, although student issues were also debated. Moreover, student council elections at Palestinian universities constituted the only segment of Palestinian communities that was able to hold elections. Although the bulk of exiled Palestinians live in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, there has been no comparable venue through which to hold such elections or even fully debate the platforms. Student activism spilled over into the surrounding communities, broadening the impact of Palestinian universities on Palestinian communities, which also engaged in self-expression.

Nevertheless, the public debate was already set in motion, first through the university and then across Palestinian communities. Thus, ideas that developed outside of Palestine among the PLO leadership took on a life of their own as they spread on the ground in Palestine through the Palestinian universities into Palestinian communities.

These developments in turn had an impact on the PLO, whose leadership remained in exile. In this respect, factional representation among student groups applied pressure to the PLO leadership in exile, because Palestinians on the ground in Palestine had gained voice across Palestinian communities with the articulation of a Palestinian national consciousness.

Although the various Palestinian political factions represented different strategies for the liberation of Palestine, the very presence of Palestinian universities allowed for the local articulation of what it means to be Palestinian. The message of Palestinian self-expression affirmed Palestinian identity as a legitimate national identity that is intrinsically linked to the land of Palestine and called for its liberation as a “common possession” of the Palestinian people.³ This expression of national consciousness explicitly communicated to the Israelis and the international community that Palestinians represent themselves and would take charge of their own affairs. Thus, Palestinian universities empowered Palestinians to develop a Palestinian national consciousness that planted the seeds of social and political change.

Palestinian Universities as Centers of Resistance, 1987 to 1992

The second period of Palestinian universities begins decisively with the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987 and ends with the breakdown of talks between Israelis and Palestinians in 1992 that took place in conjunction with the Madrid Conference of 1991. Two decades of Israeli occupation represented an ongoing battle for self-expression that came to a head in the form of a popular uprising in December 1987 when Palestinians confronted the ongoing challenge of living under Israeli occupation. The articulation of a national consciousness in the previous period transformed Palestinian universities into centers of resistance to Israeli occupation. Although the Intifada started as a spontaneous outbreak of dissatisfaction with the hopelessness of the political situation and the oppressive conditions of living under Israeli occupation, it quickly developed into a grassroots level of organizational sophistication that effectively unified all Palestinian communities. The integration of Palestinian society and sense of community prevalent during the Intifada enabled Palestinians in the landscape of Palestine to become local leaders and decision makers rather than look solely to the PLO leadership in exile for direction. The existing political factions, along with student groups and trade union activists, picked up on the momentum, which subsequently spread throughout Palestinian communities everywhere. This development in the Palestinian struggle, which marked the involvement of virtually all sectors of society, brought Palestinian self-expression to new heights. In fact, the high level of participation transformed Palestinian society seemingly overnight.

The Israeli authorities increased their interference with the operation of Palestinian universities, including through the application of the policy of closure, which came to its height during the years of the Intifada. Although the Israeli forces had previously used this policy sporadically for individual Palestinian schools or universities under

occupation, it was applied systematically during the Intifada as a form of collective punishment (Rigby, 1994). Moreover, Israeli awareness of the impact of Palestinian universities led Israeli authorities to close Palestinian universities for extended periods or block access to campus with roadblocks and checkpoints. Faculty and students were subject to harassment, detention, and even deportation. By February 1988, the Israeli military authorities had closed all Palestinian institutions of higher education indefinitely, although they allowed all but the universities to reopen by December 1988 (Al-Haq, 1990).

The Israeli policy of closure interrupted the normal operation of Palestinian universities, but it did not prevent students and even faculty from organizing off campus. Their dual role as centers of resistance and education contributed to Palestinian nationalist activities (Graham-Brown, 1984). When Palestinian universities were open, the institutions tailored their operation to accommodate student activism. For example, at times they compensated for lost class time by extending the school year into summer to minimize delays in matriculation for students.

Nevertheless, the Israeli response to the Intifada took its toll on Palestinian universities, resulting in a period of institutional stagnation. Its impact on their development as institutions of higher learning cannot be underestimated. Not only were Palestinian universities forced to pay salaries that constituted about 60% of the total budget without getting tuition from students to cover this cost but also the resulting financial crisis served as a serious obstacle to the planning and development of these institutions (see Khalaf, 1991).⁴ The Gulf War also resulted in a grave financial setback for institutions of higher education because funding from the Gulf states was discontinued as a result of Palestinian sympathy for Iraq (Heiberg & Ovensen, 1994; Rigby, 1994). As one official from the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education explained, people became “forced to rethink how to get money to [support] their families” (personal communication, August 2000). Skills became more valuable than a degree. The slow progress with the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians prevented the development of a viable Palestinian economy to support its institutions.

Emerging leadership beyond the Intifada. The Intifada posed new challenges to Palestinian communities beyond the universities. Its relatively young leadership lacked the maturity and experience of more prominent Palestinian leaders who expressed their support for the Intifada but were not actively involved in the day-to-day planning of its activities, making their role more symbolic than actual. Consequently, the Intifada was not able to adequately address the ongoing political, economic, and social concerns of Palestinian communities. The Intifada leadership was not aware of the limits they faced in resisting occupation and failed to develop a long-term strategy that would enable Palestinian communities to sustain the Intifada, maximize its impact on the Palestinian struggle for independence, and move beyond it. Thus, leadership at the local level was focused on local resistance activities rather than the larger picture of political change.

Although the leadership of the Intifada lacked strategic vision, university faculty emerged in the public eye as strong local leaders in support of resistance to occu-

pation. One Palestinian university president explained how local access to higher education gave rise to numerous intellectual leaders within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (personal communication, August 2000). Even as the effectiveness of the Intifada came into question because of its lack of strategic vision, the world was listening to Palestinian students and faculty make the Palestinian case to Israelis and the international community. Although the young boy in the street throwing stones at the Israeli army became the face of the Intifada, it was the university that translated those stones into an articulate appeal to the international community for an end to Israeli occupation. The Intifada brought international attention to the Palestinian plight, but the university articulated its message. Thus, we can associate these acts of resistance with the universities even as they spilled over into surrounding communities because the leadership to articulate the message of Palestine consisted of the students and faculty of these institutions. The student body looked to faculty members to articulate their view of the Palestinian struggle to the international community, making the Palestinian universities the link between the international community and Palestinian communities inside Palestine. The centrality of Palestinian universities in articulating the message of the Intifada in spite of Israel's ongoing interference with their operation speaks for the impact these institutions had during this period, even though many of their doors remained closed for extended periods of time.⁵ Moreover, the establishment of two new Palestinian universities in 1991 at the eve of the Madrid Conference—Al-Quds University in Jerusalem and Al-Azhar University in Gaza—further demonstrates the strength of Palestinian universities to carry on under Israeli occupation.

The connection between Palestinian universities and the international community allowed for a whole new leadership to emerge on the ground in Palestine and for their voices to become internationally recognized, making Palestinian faculty members the new emerging leaders of the Palestinians inside Palestine and representatives of the Palestinian struggle. Many of the prominent Palestinian leaders of today first emerged as leaders during the Intifada. For example, Hanan Ashrawi, a faculty member at Birzeit University during the Intifada, provided substantial commentary on the Intifada, which contributed to her nomination as the spokesperson for the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. She later became the first Palestinian minister of higher education under the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1996. Azmi Bishara, a Palestinian from Nazareth who taught at Birzeit University during the Intifada, founded a political party on his return to Nazareth that advocates Palestinian rights in Israel, which won him a seat in the Israeli Knesset. Qasim al-Khatib was also a faculty member at Birzeit University and currently serves as the minister of labor under the PA. Sari Nusseibi, a faculty member at Birzeit University during the Intifada, became a recognized political commentator through his contributions during the Intifada and currently serves as the president of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. Abdel Sattar Qasim, from An-Najah National University in Nablus, is currently a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and was an outspoken critic of Arafat up through Arafat's death in 2004; he was originally a candidate in the 2005 presidential elections but withdrew because of Israeli restrictions on movement, which interfered with his ability to campaign ("Palestinian Elections," 2005). At the student level, Marwan Barghouti, the leader of

the Shabiba Student Movement at Birzeit University, which represents the Fatah student slate, became the leader of Fatah in Palestine.

In short, the persistence of the Intifada and its representation through the emerging leadership at Palestinian universities and beyond brought the Palestine question back onto the international agenda and ultimately led to a climate ripe for negotiations (Rigby, 1994). In this respect, the Madrid Conference was a direct outcome of the Intifada, which resulted in face-to-face negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians for the first time in November 1991 and marked the formal end of the Intifada. The fact that the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid Conference was composed largely of prominent leaders from Palestinian universities underscores the universities' contribution to Palestinian resistance during this period. It also speaks for the impact Palestinian universities had on the emergence of a leadership that could confront the challenges facing Palestinians on the ground in Palestine. In fact, the leadership at Madrid represented the outcome of their presence in Palestine and ensured their capacity to represent a broad range of Palestinian communities and their interests.

Palestinian Universities as Contributors to State Formation, 1993 to 2000

The third period of Palestinian universities spans the life of the Oslo Accords from the signing of the *Declaration of Principles* in 1993 to its looming death with the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000. This period was marked by a surge in higher education with respect to enrollment, program development, and outreach to Palestinian communities. It was the hope at the prospects for Palestinian statehood that prompted these activities. Palestinian universities and their surrounding communities were engaged in the long-awaited task of building the state of Palestine, and the universities were instrumental in providing opportunities to contribute to that effort.

Palestinian universities quickly responded to the promise of Oslo by moving "from resistance to reconstruction," as one official from the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education pointed out (personal communication, August 2000). An official from the European Community (personal communication, August 2000) explained that their "reconstruction" effort was facilitated in part by a generous pledge of emergency aid from the European Union in 1994 in the amount of US\$18 million per year during the course of 5 years to support the operational budgets of Palestinian universities, which would offset the discrepancy between student tuition and actual cost per student.⁶ This support restored financial independence that Palestinian universities had lost in the previous period and reestablished their institutional presence. The promise of statehood and the resulting optimism it generated also redefined the impact of Palestinian universities as their attention turned from resistance to state formation. The momentum of this shift is reflected in the universities' development of new programs that would be beneficial to a future Palestinian state. Expansion of programs at Palestinian universities emphasized technical and vocational education such as banking, commerce, administration, infrastructure, and tourism.

Expansion of programs. The expansion of programs, particularly at the graduate level, was met in turn with a marked increase in student enrollment at Palestinian universities as Palestinians sought the knowledge and skills that would prepare them for employment in a future state.⁷ In fact, student enrollment increased by more than 150% from 1993 to 2000—from 22,750 to more than 60,000 students.⁸ Although the bulk of this increase was at the bachelor's level, increase at the master's level was more than 1200%, from 147 students in 1995 to 1,943 students in 1999 alone, and would have been expected to skyrocket in the future as an overall increase in enrollment makes that many more students eligible for graduate studies (Sanyal, 2000). These figures suggest the extent to which the promise of statehood pervaded throughout Palestinian communities as well as the universities' capacity to cater to that enthusiasm by expanding programs.

Expansion of services. The contribution of Palestinian universities to state formation during this period extended beyond the academic preparation of Palestinian youth. Palestinian universities also strengthened their relationship with Palestinian communities by expanding their service component with the establishment of centers and institutes that directly contributed to surrounding communities and at the same time enriched learning opportunities for students.⁹ The numerous centers and institutes demonstrated a broad spectrum of services Palestinian universities provided their respective Palestinian communities. The services Palestinian universities provided focused on institution building and demonstrated their ability to contribute to state formation. Related activities occurred at all universities, although in varying degrees depending on the capacity and commitment of the university to provide such services. The fact that all Palestinian universities independently explored ways to serve their surrounding communities speaks for the synergy between Palestinian universities and their surrounding communities. In other words, although these contributions were for the most part not coordinated across institutions, they resulted in an accumulative impact that strengthened the relationship between Palestinian universities and their surrounding communities and increased the capacity of these institutions to confront the challenge of state formation by developing needed services within those communities.

These relationships contributed to the social and economic health of Palestinians independent of, and later in spite of, the developing power structure that was to become "the state," namely, the PA. In this respect, Palestinian universities were in their prime as national institutions during this period because they were preparing for the establishment of a Palestinian state. At the same time, they were careful to distinguish between the Oslo sanctioned process of creating a Palestinian entity and the actual needs of Palestinian communities, which became increasingly at odds with one another as Oslo's failure became apparent.

Birzeit University's (2004) self-proclaimed purpose in the establishment of such centers speaks for the strong relationship between Palestinian universities and Palestinian communities:

The dynamic purpose and mission of each of our centers in expanding scientific and social frontiers has been exceptional considering the daily realities of life in this region. Birzeit University is an integral part of the Palestinian community and sees itself as instrumental in the maintenance and development of the society through the nurturing of one of our most valuable natural resources, human beings. Birzeit continuously aims to ensure that its strong ties with the community are maintained and evolve through a range of activities that aim to assist in the advancement of our students and the community. (para. 1)

This statement illustrates the extent to which Palestinian universities view themselves as integral components of the Palestinian communities they serve. Their awareness of and commitment to this relationship facilitates the dynamic between them and has been key to enabling Palestinian individuals and communities to confront the specific challenges of their historical context. This period called on Palestinian universities to enable Palestinians to address the challenge of state formation.

The emphasis at Palestinian universities following the Oslo Accords to provide the anticipated knowledge and skills in preparation for a future state stands in marked contrast to the previous two periods during which Palestinian universities were fostering national consciousness and serving as centers of resistance. Now universities were investing in building the infrastructure and institutions to support a future state and students were focused on working toward securing their role in that state rather than articulating their identity or developing strategies for resistance to Israeli occupation. In both respects, this period represents a tremendous shift away from nationalist activity. That is not to say that identity and resistance had become nonissues but rather, they no longer were the center of the Palestinian universities' activities.

State formation took center stage because of the feeling among Palestinians that a state was finally within reach. Palestinian universities responded to this feeling by providing Palestinians with the capacity to determine what was needed in preparation for a state and a means by which the university could contribute toward that end. However, the ongoing conflict with the state of Israel kept Palestinian universities in confrontation with the state of Israel. In this respect, the transformation of Palestinian higher education reflects its increasingly complex engagement with the Palestinian communities they serve as well as the ongoing perceived and practical value of Palestinian universities within these communities.

It is ironic that with time, the establishment of the PA and its ministries undermined the autonomy of Palestinian universities. Financial support of donors from the international community and the Arab world were suddenly channeled through the newly established PA. This change undermined the former independent relationships universities had with their supporters because the PA was more involved in building its power and influence than supporting the public good of higher education. Palestinian universities found it increasingly difficult to operate in the shadows of a politically driven PA that limited their capacity to serve Palestinian communities as national institutions.

The resulting financial constraints on Palestinian universities were further magnified by the realization that the Oslo Accords would lead to nothing more than areas of limited autonomy with no substantive control of land, resources, and borders. Moreover, failure to even bring the question of Jerusalem and the future of Palestinian refugees onto the table only increased suspicion concerning the long-term outcome of the Oslo Accords. Palestinians felt undermined by what they had believed was a genuine process of peace. And so this period ends with a marked shift from hope to frustration, a downward slope that now challenges the capacity of Palestinian universities to serve their communities as national institutions in the process of building the state.

Palestinian Universities in Crisis

The escalation of the conflict since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 has had a severe impact on Palestinian universities. Palestinian universities have faced many challenges during the past three decades since their inception, but their current state is best described as in crisis. Israel has officially closed some universities for extended periods, whereas others have at times been effectively closed because of conditions on the ground.¹⁰ The dramatic increase in Israeli checkpoints throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as a policy of closure and curfews that have been in place for weeks at a time, have severely restricted the ability of students and faculty to reach campus.¹¹ Palestinians have resisted by going around checkpoints when they can or simply staging protests when their passage was blocked. Some of these protests have resulted in violent confrontations with the Israeli army. Faculty and students who reach campus are met with harassment from the Israeli army, which has cost some their lives.

Some Palestinian universities have released appeals for help in response to the horrendous conditions of the current crisis. Birzeit University, for example, has issued an appeal to the international community in conjunction with its ongoing Right to Education Campaign that calls on "Israel to take immediate action to restore the right of education to Birzeit University students and all students in the Palestinian territory by removing all military obstacles to free and safe access to educational institutions and work places" (Birzeit University's Right to Education Campaign, 2004). More than 200 prominent intellectuals throughout the world, including Hilary Rose and Jacques Derrida, have issued their own appeals in support of Palestinian students' right to education (Curtis, 2002). An-Najah National University (2002) in Nablus issued a similar appeal to restore the right to education for Palestinians:

As 60% of our students come from the surrounding area, the majority of them have returned to their families. Everyone is under a strict curfew and confined to their homes, with dwindling hope of returning to their academic lives in the foreseeable future. The Israeli government's attack on Palestinian educational institutions has the effect of severely limiting the development of a healthy and sustainable society, and throws a

wrench into any hopes for peace and reconciliation between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. (para. 6)

Al-Quds University (2004) in Jerusalem has also issued an appeal to the international community, drawing attention to the disruption of classes and community services and the “unprecedented financial and operational crisis” Palestinian universities are facing.

This interference with the operation of Palestinian universities has disrupted the lives of students and faculty and jeopardized the universities’ capacity to provide important services to surrounding communities. Students’ exams and courses of study have been delayed and the faculty is unable to carry on with its work. Travel restrictions have placed a tremendous burden on the already fragile Palestinian economy, making it challenging for students to pay tuition and universities to pay faculty and staff. Moreover, planning within universities and coordination between them is severely strained. The instability of the political situation and the uncertainty of the future of the PA have made Palestinian universities increasingly dependent on financial support from the international community. As a representative of the European Community explained, much of this support has been sporadic and uneven because of variations in the ability of universities to solicit funds and the project-by-project basis according to which aid is granted (personal communication, August 2000). Moreover, the PA continues to control international contributions to Palestinian universities, which further undermines the development of these institutions.

Implications for the Future

Current restrictions on Palestinian universities have expanded Palestinian expression beyond the universities, similar to during the first Intifada when the energy to resist Israeli occupation carried over into Palestinian communities. However, the second Intifada has taken on a different form because the circumstances have changed. The demands have increased because Palestinians know more clearly what they want and need: not just an end to Israeli occupation but also the restoration of their right to be Palestinian in Palestine. All Palestinians essentially share in this demand.

Nevertheless, Palestinian universities have empowered Palestinians to understand their identity in these terms, that anything short of restoring the Palestinian right to Palestine is a nonsolution because it condemns half of all Palestinians to permanent exile and forbids the other half access to the rest of their homeland. Palestinian communities beyond the university will continue to make that demand in different ways. Failure of the leadership of the Palestinians and the Israelis and the international community to recognize the Palestinian right to Palestine could very well result in greater support among Palestinians for more extreme expressions of their identity because their identity as Palestinians tied to the land of Palestine cannot be compromised.

Broad Palestinian support for the Oslo Accords demonstrates the validity of my analysis. When Palestinians believed that their right to be Palestinian in Palestine

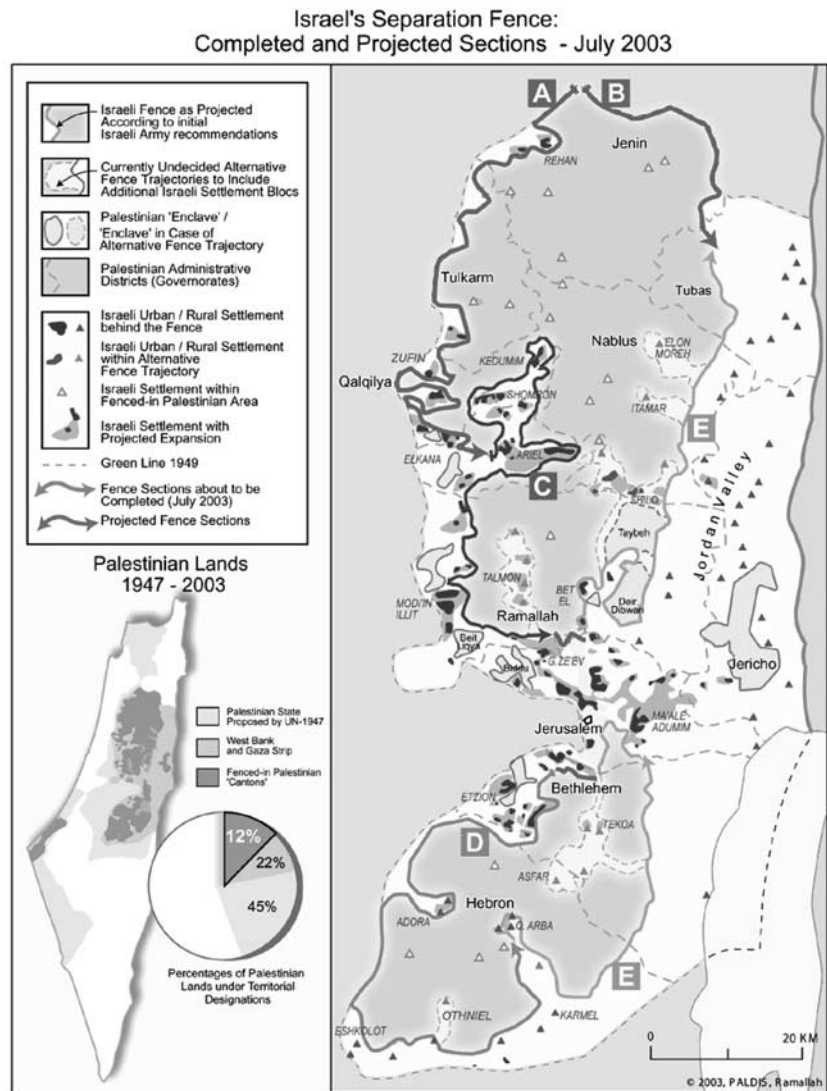
would be recognized through the Oslo Accords, they worked diligently and constructively toward that goal by developing the infrastructure of a Palestinian state. However, once Palestinians realized that the Oslo process would undermine their right to be Palestinian in Palestine, forcing Palestinians to either abandon the process or forfeit their national identity, which would have amounted to national suicide, Palestinians engaged in forms of resistance to reassert their identity. Current expressions of resistance represent an effort to keep Palestine, Palestinian identity, and the demand to be Palestinian in Palestine alive and can be understood as a direct outcome of the failure of the Oslo Accords. At the same time, these expressions of resistance demonstrate how Palestinian universities empowered Palestinians to reassert their Palestinian identity.

Israel's construction of a separation wall has only added to the crisis by cutting off communities from each other and resulting in further land confiscations (see Figure 1). The separation wall will physically isolate Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from most Israelis, but it will arguably only invite Palestinians to voice their demands to be Palestinian in Palestine even more loudly and clearly. So far their opposition to the wall has been met with international support, including the recent ruling by the International Court of Justice (2004) at The Hague declaring the wall illegal in July 2004. The ongoing construction of the wall will undoubtedly lead to a roadblock rather than the roadmap proposed by President Bush in May 2003. Just as the wall fell in Berlin as a symbol of confinement and deprivation, so is the wall between Palestinians and Israelis destined to fall. Some courageous Palestinians and Israelis are engaged in that very process of breaking down walls by reaching right through them. The university could be instrumental in breaking down those walls so that both Palestinians and Israelis move beyond the current deadlock.

In the meantime, however, Palestinian universities will work to safeguard Palestinian demands that are central to not only their identity but also their understanding of what a just resolution of the conflict would require, namely, the nonnegotiables such as the Palestinian right of return or equal access to land, resources, and governance. Palestinian communities have been empowered by Palestinian universities to protect their fundamental rights, although the state of Israel treats them as cards for negotiation. The terms of resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that although Palestinian universities may appear to be supporting if not instigating conflict in their effort to safeguard Palestinian demands, the historical record demonstrates that they have been empowered to become integral players on the long and difficult road toward peace.

As Palestinian universities look to the future, they are limited by the very real restrictions on their capacity to make peace when peace for Israel means relinquishing territorial, human, and national rights for Palestinians. The reality of present circumstances has clearly narrowed the function of Palestinian universities first and foremost to not giving in to solutions that undermine the very core of Palestinian identity, namely, the right to be Palestinian in Palestine. Palestinian universities have been

Figure 1
Israel's Separation Fence: Completed and Projected Sections, July 2003



Source: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (2003). Reprinted with permission.

instrumental in empowering Palestinians to articulate their demands, and the survival of Palestine as a nation depends on their continuing persistence, even if they must in the short term suffer the heavy blows of Israeli opposition to those demands.

Conclusion

The Palestinian context demonstrates the capacity of the university to empower Palestinians as they confront the Israeli challenge to their identity as Palestinians and their connection to the land of Palestine. The case of Palestine highlights the potential of the university to empower communities to engage in a process of social and political change. The emergence of Palestinian universities and their transformation with time have provided Palestinians with a medium for self-expression that has empowered Palestinian communities to confront the challenges they faced during the three periods outlined above. The Palestinian context suggests that the space for collective self-expression is central to the university's capacity to empower communities and contribute to social and political change.

The high degree of alignment in the Palestinian context between the challenges of a given historical period and the capacity of Palestinian universities to empower Palestinian communities to confront those challenges provides an excellent example of the potential impact of the university on social and political change. In each period, the university served as a vehicle through which Palestinian communities were empowered to understand and confront current challenges. Each subsequent period was marked by greater access to the university and increased engagement across communities. Increased access resulted in greater inclusion of Palestinian communities in the activities of the universities, transforming them into dynamic social forces that paved the way for the articulation of a Palestinian national consciousness, facilitated resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and fostered the preparations for a Palestinian state. To what extent Palestinian universities will continue to empower Palestinian communities depends largely on the capacity of the universities to safeguard Palestinian self-expression through these institutions.

Notes

1. The Palestinian Universities that emerged during the first period include Birzeit University in 1972, Bethlehem University in 1973, An-Najah National University (Nablus) in 1977, al-Islamia University (Gaza) in 1978, al-Khalil University (Hebron) in 1980, and finally al-Quds University (Jerusalem) in 1984. The Palestine Polytechnic Institute was actually founded in 1978 but not recognized as a university until 1999, with the addition of graduate programs. Today there are a total of 10 Palestinian universities. Subsequent Palestinian universities include: Al-Azhar in Gaza in 1991; Al-Quds Open University in 1991, which is based in Jerusalem, but operates 20 study centers throughout the West Bank and Gaza; and the Arab University in Jenin, which was established in 1995 but opened for classes in 2000 and marks the first private Palestinian university. All others are public, nongovernmental institutions.

2. Palestinians everywhere continue to commemorate Land Day. For example, on March 30, 2003, Palestinians with Israeli citizenship marched to the Negev desert on Land Day to protest the state's destruction by crop dusters of wheat fields planted by the Palestinian Bedouin community in the Negev desert.

3. Here I apply the concept of common possession to the Palestinian case from Tambiah (1996).
4. More recent, the financial crisis in higher education has meant that some institutions have not been able to pay salaries for working faculty.
5. On December 1, 1987, the Israeli authorities implemented the closure of 6 universities and 14 junior/community colleges and institutes. On February 15, 1990, closure was extended indefinitely for universities and for 6 months for junior/community colleges. This policy continued until October 1992, nearly 1 year before the signing of the Oslo Accords (see Khalaf, 1991).
6. This aid actually covered 70% to 80% of the operational costs of Palestinian universities.
7. Graduate programs were introduced at the master's level, with the exception of An-Najah National University in Nablus, which introduced a Ph.D. in chemistry, marking the first Ph.D. program offered at a Palestinian university.
8. Enrollment figures for 1994 are from United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (1994b); enrollment figures for 2000 were provided by the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education (personal interview, August 2000).
9. My discussion of the centers and institutes at Palestinian universities is based in part on interviews with university administrators and faculty in Palestine in August 2000 and subsequent correspondence with interviewees, as well as written documentation from the universities and university Web sites.
10. Universities shut down by Israeli authorities include Al-Quds University in Jerusalem and al-Khalil University and Palestine Polytechnic University in Hebron. After repeated Israeli incursions into the city of Bethlehem, Bethlehem University closed its own doors on March 19, 2003, "in order to safeguard the safety and security of our students and faculty and staff" (Malham, 2003). Bethlehem University has since reopened its doors.
11. The Israeli army has placed increased checkpoints throughout the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem to control the movement of Palestinians in these areas. The policy of closure seals off specified areas, preventing anyone from entering or leaving an area, which usually constitutes the city, town, or village limits, effectively confining people to their immediate area. Curfews restrict Palestinians from leaving their homes for any reason. Violators of curfews are met with gunfire.

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