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The Struggle for Academic Freedom in Palestine

Riham Barghouti, former Director of Public Relations at Birzeit University (2003-2005)
and Helen Murray, Coordinator of Birzeit University’s Right to Education Campaign

**Please note that the views expressed in this paper are the opinions of the authors*

Academic freedom, along with every other type of freedom, is stifled and suppressed under colonial rule and military occupation. This is because the driving objectives of occupation are the suppression of a society, the de-development of its capacities, and the elimination of its national aspirations.

Palestinians have historically strived for education as an end in itself, but also as a means of survival and resistance against military occupation, dispossession and exile. When the first Palestinian universities emerged in the 1970s, their vision was to not only provide opportunities for higher education, but also to support and develop Palestinian society as an intrinsic part of the national struggle for liberation.

It is for this reason that Palestinian academic institutions have been targeted and attacked by the Israeli military occupation. These attacks have come in the form of closure of institutions, military obstruction of access, arrests and deportations, the killing and injuring of students and teachers and attempts to criminalize the Palestinian educational process. While Palestinian academic institutions have been able to withstand these attacks and sometimes even excel in overcoming the challenges of education under occupation, the fact remains that any kind of development under the weight of occupation is ultimately unattainable.

Presenting the case of Birzeit University in the West Bank, this paper will discuss the importance of education in challenging the foundations of occupation. It will discuss how and why the first Palestinian universities, as national institutions and leading actors in the struggle for educational rights and freedoms in Palestine, have been systematically targeted by the Israeli occupation from the moment they were established.

The paper will then go on to explore two approaches to supporting the Palestinian struggle for academic freedom: firstly through the promotion of international academic cooperation in the current context; and secondly through exerting the necessary pressure to bring an end to the Israeli occupation which continues to block the possibility of achieving any form of freedom in Palestine.

1. The Struggle to Emerge: Palestinian Universities as National Institutions (1967-1987)

“What struck me is that if there is any hope for the future it is in such national institutions as Birzeit which under tremendous pressures and remarkable odds still functions, often brilliantly and always sensibly.” (Edward Said)¹

The first Palestinian universities emerged in the 1970s. Before that, access to higher education for Palestinians was limited; those who could afford it went to study abroad, predominantly to neighbouring countries of Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. But after 1967, the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip resulted in severe travel restrictions on Palestinians,

¹ Edward Said, “A Longer View”, Al Ahran Weekly, 3-9 December 1998, Issue No.406

which prevented even the privileged few from traveling abroad to continue their education. It was this crisis environment that prompted a college in the village of Birzeit, north of Ramallah in the West Bank, to begin offering Bachelors programs in Arts and Sciences. In 1975 the name "Birzeit University" was adopted, making it the first Arab university to be established in Palestine.

From the very beginning Birzeit University was more than an academic institution. In the context of a debilitating military occupation, Birzeit University was founded on a vision of building a free, civil Palestinian society, and was committed to national development and supporting the needs of the local community. Its progressive approach to promoting democratic values and the free exchange of ideas within the walls of the institution and among the student body also extended to the overall society in an effort to effect real political and social change.

Largely due to the vacuum created by the absence of a national government, the University developed a range of community programmes to provide services and conduct research into social issues such as literacy, health, gender and the environment. Many of these programmes have since evolved into permanent centers, such as the Institute for Community and Public Health and the Institute of Women's Studies. Moreover, community service has always been an integral component of student life at the University and to this day, all Birzeit students need to complete 120 hours of voluntary community work in order to graduate.

In 1973, just as Birzeit was nearing completion as a fully-fledged university, the Israeli authorities closed down the campus by military order for the first time. A year later, in 1974, the founder and first president of Birzeit University, Dr. Hanna Nasir, was arrested by the Israeli authorities and deported to Lebanon. Dr. Nasir was to remain in exile for the next nineteen years. When he was finally allowed to return to Palestine in 1993, he gave a speech that captured the University's struggle for academic freedom as part of the wider struggle for all human rights. He said:

It has been my personal belief for many years that the key to the liberation of Palestine can be found in higher education.... For a society under occupation which is involved in the transition to an independent nation, higher education, such as that represented by Birzeit University, is essential as a forum for critical thinking, technical expertise, and community leadership. The close relationship between academic freedom, human rights, and the right to self-determination remains the crucible in which Palestinian higher education must develop and thrive.²

In 1980, Military Order 854 was introduced, the only military order with specific reference to higher education, giving the Israeli authorities control over curriculum, admission of students and the hiring and firing of faculty. Soon after, all 'foreign staff' at Palestinian universities, the majority of whom were native Palestinians who had been denied residency rights, were required to sign a "loyalty oath", rejecting affiliation with any organization "hostile" to Israel and denying

² Dr. Hanna Nasir, "Letter from the President", Birzeit University, 1993

membership of the PLO. Most academics refused to sign the oath and consequently the Israeli authorities were provided with a pretext for mass deportations of so-called 'foreign staff'.³

Censorship was another basic means of control: all reading materials, books and periodicals entering the West Bank and Gaza Strip had to be approved by the military censor. In 1979, Birzeit University protested that, "repeated attempts for over a year by the University to gain permission to subscribe to some 50 academic periodicals in Arabic...have resulted in permission for *one* periodical subscription." All the materials denied Birzeit University were meanwhile available at the Israeli Hebrew University in Jerusalem.⁴

However, in spite of Israel's efforts to cripple the development of Palestinian higher education throughout these early years, an enormous amount was achieved. At the end of the 1980s, six Palestinian universities were established, with some 22,000 students enrolled. Committed to the struggle for national development and liberation, the Palestinian universities pioneered an approach to higher education that often went beyond the traditional confines of academia, attempting to place the universities at the heart of the local community by responding to its needs.

2. The Struggle to Survive: Making Education Illegal (1987-1992)

"The closure [of the universities] is not simply a collective punishment...In my opinion, the Israelis regret the fact that the universities were ever established...What they are trying to accomplish is a slow annihilation of the institutions". (Mukhlis Hammouri, Hebron University, 1990)

In December 1987, the first popular uprising against the Israeli military occupation, now referred to as the first Intifada, exploded throughout the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Within days, Israel closed down several higher education colleges and universities. In subsequent weeks, military orders were issued to all other institutions of higher education so that by 1 February 1988, all six Palestinian universities, thirteen colleges and five government training schools were shut down. On 2 February, Israeli Radio announced that the Israeli Army had ordered all 1,194 schools in the West Bank closed until further notice. Less than a year later, the kindergartens were also closed down by military order.⁵ Palestinian education had effectively become illegal.

Birzeit University, together with all other institutions of higher education, remained closed for four-and-a-half years. From 1988 to 1992, no student or lecturer was allowed to attend a class in a university classroom, browse in a university library, or work in a university laboratory.⁶

³ *Palestinians and Higher Education: The Doors of Learning Closed*, World University Service UK and Association of University Teachers, 1990, p.7

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.6

⁵ Schools and kindergartens were subject to intermittent closures during this period, while higher education institutions remained fully closed for nearly 5 years.

⁶ *The Criminalization of Education: Academic Freedom and Human Rights at Birzeit University During the Palestinian Uprising*, Public Relations Office, Birzeit University, December 1989, p.2

As the gates to learning were closed, Birzeit University refused to accept the criminalization of education and continued to hold classes ‘underground’ in homes, offices, community centres, mosques and churches. These classes were frequently raided by the Israeli Army and any students and teachers found in attendance were arrested. Students were even arrested for carrying books as this was considered evidence that they were on their way to an ‘illegal class’.

On 19 April 1989, an Israeli newspaper, *The Jerusalem Post*, reported that the Israeli police had “uncovered a network of illegal classes held by West Bank universities at private high schools in East Jerusalem.”⁷ A few days later on 24 April 1989, the Israeli Army raided the YMCA building in Ramallah, which housed the departmental offices of Birzeit University throughout the closure of the campus. A warning was delivered to the University administration: “Under no circumstances can you teach, in houses or anywhere else. If we find anyone teaching, or any students carrying books we will take appropriate measures against them”.⁸ In short, the Israeli authorities criminalized the educational process itself.

As always, the Israeli justification was ‘security’. The authorities argued that schools and universities were sites of student demonstrations and unrest, so therefore all educational institutions had to be closed down. This security rationale – quite apart from its illegality as a form of collective punishment and wholesale violation of the right to education under international law - does not stand up to basic scrutiny. How could kindergartens pose a threat to the state of Israel? If the closures were in direct response to the Intifada, which started in 1987, why had Birzeit University already been closed down fifteen times since 1973? And why were all forms of educational activity, on or off campus, outlawed by the military authorities?

The closure of educational institutions was part of Israel’s efforts to undermine the development of Palestinian civil society. As a result, the very act of pursuing an education became a way of directly challenging the occupation.

3. The Struggle Continues: Barriers to Education (1992-2005)

“Palestinian education and propaganda are more dangerous to Israel than Palestinian weapons” (Ariel Sharon, Ha’aretz, 19/11/2004)

Birzeit University campus was finally re-opened on 29 April 1992, after 51 months of closure. However, the attacks against the University were by no means over. While some might imagine that the years of the Oslo Peace Process were years of recovery and consolidation for the Palestinian universities, what actually transpired was quite the opposite. As one of thirty exiled Palestinians allowed to return to Palestine in a ‘confidence building measure’ in 1993, the then president of Birzeit University, Dr. Hanna Nasir, was well aware that despite the resilience of the University in the face of closure, the biggest battles still lay ahead:

⁷ The Jerusalem Post, 19 April 1989, cited in Stanley Cohen, “Education as Crime”, The Jerusalem Post, 18 May 1989

⁸ Deputy Head of the Civil Administration, Major Micha, speaking to Albert Aghazarian, Director of Public Relations at Birzeit University, cited in *The Criminalization of Education*, p.15

Birzeit University continues to face serious difficulties in the form of severe financial constraints and numerous human rights violations which threaten the academic liberties of our staff and students; arbitrary arrest, torture, deportation, and administrative harassment are daily threats which beset our institution.⁹

It was throughout the years of the ‘peace process’ that Israel first imposed its closure policy on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Palestinians were suddenly prevented from traveling between the West Bank and Gaza, and were also banned from entering Jerusalem, without special military permits. An apartheid pass-system emerged, whereby students and teachers, along with everyone else, had to apply for permits to move around for limited periods. At Birzeit University, students from Gaza were the worst affected.

When the second Intifada began in September 2000, Palestinian educational institutions came under the full force of Israeli attacks once again: both directly as military targets and indirectly as a result of Israel’s policies of collective punishment and prison-like restrictions on movement, which have prevented thousands of students and teachers from reaching their universities.

Over the last five years, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, some three-hundred schools and eight universities have been shelled, shot at or raided by the Israeli Army. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights records that in the Gaza Strip alone, seventy-three educational institutions have been partially or totally destroyed, including a teacher-training college which was completely demolished in March 2004.

Reminiscent of the first Intifada, Hebron University and the Palestine Polytechnic University were closed down by military order for most of 2003, affecting more than 6,000 students. The closures were carried out, according to an Israeli Army spokesman, because the Army “has a duty to prevent education that incites murder of Israelis.” The students of Hebron and Palestine Polytechnic Universities eventually broke down the gates to their universities, in defiance of the Israeli Army, to reconvene classes and demand their right to education.

That same year, Al-Quds University was issued with a military order explaining that an eight meter-high concrete wall would soon cut through the campus, confiscating one-third of its grounds. After an international campaign, the path of the wall was eventually moved to just outside the entrance of Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, cutting it off from Jerusalem and 36% of its students.

In March 2001, the Israeli Army bulldozed the main road connecting Birzeit University to the majority of its staff and students. A military checkpoint was placed on this road for almost three years, severely disrupting the working life of the University. An appeal put out by the University to the international community at that time described the checkpoint as:

...part of the expanded network of roadblocks preventing communication between all Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank. Even when open, the checkpoint allows only pedestrian traffic to pass; Israeli soldiers posted there arbitrarily deny passage to students and other civilians, as well as regularly engage

⁹ Dr. Hanna Nasir, “Letter from the President”, Birzeit University newsletter, 1993

in various forms of harassment which at times have resulted in the physical injury of students and faculty. When closed the checkpoint effectively brings the working life of the University to a halt.¹⁰

The Israeli invasions into major towns and cities in the West Bank in 2002, resulting in prolonged curfews, brought a halt to all forms of Palestinian life for months at a time. Once again, Birzeit University demonstrated its capacity for resilience in the face of extreme adversity, this time utilising information technology with the development of a University internet portal, called 'Ritaj'. This ensured continued communication between faculty and students online when access to the University was denied.

But the ongoing ghettoization, separation and isolation of Palestinian areas - created by the construction of the illegal wall inside the West Bank, the existence of over 700 checkpoints and roadblocks throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the frequent closure of cities and prolonged curfews – have all had a catastrophic impact on the economic, social and psychological well-being of students and faculty.

The constant state of emergency in Palestinian academic institutions, including Birzeit University, has made long-term strategic planning impossible. Birzeit has not been able to carry out the necessary evaluation and renewal of its academic and other programs, which undermines its capacity to maintain academic standards and continue meeting the human resource needs of the society.

Furthermore, due to the general devastation of the Palestinian economy, the University is facing severe financial problems. According to United Nations figures, Palestinian poverty levels have more than trebled since 1999. Today, 64% of the Palestinian population of the occupied Palestinian territory live in poverty, with the figure rising to 78% in the Gaza Strip.¹¹ Reflecting this, the number of Birzeit University students in need of financial assistance has risen from 300 students in 1999 to over 3,000 in 2004. The combined loss of tuition fees due to students' inability to pay, decreased funding from international aid agencies as a result of diversion of funds to meet the emergency needs of the society, and additional costs related to prolonged closures have resulted in the loss of several million dollars since 2000.

Moreover, Birzeit University has been increasingly unable to fulfil its basic role as a national institution, simply because many students can no longer reach the University. Between 2000 and 2005, the number of students from Gaza enrolled at Birzeit University dropped from 400 students to 13. In the academic year 2004-2005, the number of incoming students from the north West Bank town of Jenin declined from an average of 120 students per year to zero. The ultimate fear is that if these trends continue unabated, Birzeit and other Palestinian universities will gradually become more localized, undermining their vital and progressive role in Palestinian society as a whole.

¹⁰ "Appeal in Support of the Right to Education at Birzeit University", July 2002

¹¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, www.ochaopt.org

4. Supporting the Struggle for Academic Freedom

“It makes an impact on students and teachers, feeling that we’re not alone and people around the world know about us and that we deserve to live like other people do...Silence I would say is more painful than the bullets of occupation.” (Dr. Carmela Armanios, Birzeit University, 2003)¹²

Birzeit University has long depended upon international support and its relations with the international academic community and solidarity movements to speak out against the attacks and violations of the Israeli military occupation against the University, its students and faculty.

The Birzeit University Human Rights Action Project (HRAP) was founded in 1977 by a group of faculty who were concerned with the growing number of human rights violations against Birzeit University students and staff by the Israeli military authorities. Concerned faculty proceeded to attend military courts where students or staff were on trial, attempted to secure legal representation for those detained, and began to alert the international community about violations against members of the University community. HRAP also monitored cases of restriction orders, house raids, deportation and denial of freedom of movement and travel as they relate to university and academic activities, in addition to documenting the violations against the University itself, including army raids and closures, throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Growing out of the Human Rights Action Project and in response to the escalating violations of the occupation against Palestinian higher education, Birzeit University launched the Right to Education Campaign in 2002. Through ongoing monitoring and research on the issues affecting Palestinian education under occupation, as well as building an active campaign network in Palestine and worldwide, the Right to Education Campaign seeks to raise international awareness about the obstruction and denial of education in Palestine and to bring pressure to bear on governments, decision-makers and the Israeli authorities to guarantee safe and free access for all Palestinians to their educational institutions.

International solidarity also includes visits by international delegations to Birzeit University and participation in protests such as the marches and demonstrations against the closures and military blockade of the University. In addition to solidarity, international academic institutions and individuals have provided support for the academic development of Birzeit University in the form of scholarships and cooperation agreements. Such agreements have assisted in the development of BA and MA programs, some examples of which include the undergraduate program in Mathematics Applied to Economics, developed in cooperation with a consortium of French universities in 1999, and the Water Studies Institute, which was established in 2001 as the product of longstanding cooperation between Birzeit and UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education. Further, the ten-year cooperation with Bergen University in Norway has produced extensive joint research in areas of anthropology and geography, and has supported faculty development through the provision of PhD scholarship opportunities.

¹² Interview with Dr. Carmela Armanios, Birzeit University, Right to Education Campaign film: “A Caged Bird’s Song”, 2003

5. Cooperation under Occupation: Who Benefits?

“Two-thirds of Birzeit University academics, researchers and administrative staff object to joint Palestinian-Israeli academic cooperation projects. A large majority believes that such projects benefit the Israeli side far more than the Palestinian side. Most staff members object to such cooperation because it harms Palestinian interests.” (Poll, Birzeit University Faculty and Employees, 20 May 2005)

Surprisingly, international support for Palestinian educational activities is increasingly tied to cooperation with Israeli academic institutions. Many international, European and American grant-giving bodies are making funding available to Palestinian universities only on the condition of joint Palestinian-Israeli research collaboration.

Such donors are motivated by the false impression that joint cooperation will “help to ease tensions [between Israelis and Palestinians] since it will enable Palestinian researchers and institutions to work together with Israeli and European institutes”. This view was presented in the European Parliament in January 2004 in support of an agreement on scientific and technical cooperation between the European Community and Israel. However, as explained in a statement by Birzeit University, “the international community [needs] to understand the dynamics of the relations between the occupier and those who are under occupation. Within these dynamics cooperation is neither encouraged nor welcomed.”¹³

Past experience counters the argument that joint projects help to develop Palestinian academic institutions. The policy of non-cooperation with Israeli institutions, which is upheld by most Palestinian universities and research centers, is based on the experience that these cooperation agreements benefit only Palestinian individuals rather than Palestinian institutions. What such cooperation does however result in is the enhanced legitimacy of Israeli institutions as centers of excellence and the tacit acceptance an unacceptable situation. In order to achieve true institutional academic development, support needs to be extended directly to Palestinian institutions and targeted at improving their research capabilities. As the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Birzeit University, Dr. Lisa Taraki, expressed:

Luring fund-starved Palestinian academics in such a manner can be seen as a form of political blackmail, regardless of the intentions of the sponsors. We believe that if international funding institutions are sincere about their intention of developing the scientific and research capacity of Palestinian institutions and scholars, they should offer direct assistance and not politicize their support.¹⁴

Reflecting this reality, the Palestinian Council for Higher Education, comprised of presidents of all Palestinian universities and the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, has repeatedly rejected technical and scientific cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli

¹³ Statement by Birzeit University on the Scientific Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and Israel, 26 February 2004

¹⁴ Lisa Taraki, “Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel”, presented at SOAS Conference, “Resisting Israeli Apartheid: Strategies and Principles”, London, 5 December 2004

universities. This long-standing position of non-cooperation was most recently reaffirmed by a Council decision in 2004.¹⁵

As well as the internal policy of non-cooperation with Israeli institutions, the Palestinian academic community has also begun to call for an international boycott of Israeli institutions. In 2004, Palestinian academics launched the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) to promote further initiatives and to develop a Palestinian led strategy for boycott. On July 9, 2005, on the first anniversary of the International Court of Justice ruling on the illegality of the Israeli Wall, some 200 Palestinian civil society organizations, federations and unions, issued a call for boycott, divestments and sanctions against Israel until such a time as it complies with international law and the universal principles of human rights.

6. The Struggle to End the Occupation: Transforming Words into Action

“In view of the fact that people of conscience in the international community of scholars and intellectuals have historically shouldered the moral responsibility to fight injustice, as exemplified in their struggle to abolish apartheid in South Africa through diverse forms of boycott, PACBI calls upon them to boycott Israel’s academic and cultural institution in the spirit of international solidarity, moral consistency and resistance to oppression.” (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel)¹⁶

It may seem audacious to come to a conference on academic freedom to talk about the boycott of academic institutions. However, it is our contention that academic boycott within the context of an overall strategy of sanctions and boycott against Israel, is one of the few effective means left to exert the necessary pressure on Israel to bring an end to its illegal and violent occupation and continuing obstruction of Palestinian education.

The flagrant violations of the Israeli occupation against Palestinian educational institutions and the complicity of Israeli academia, has prompted a number of calls for boycott of Israeli academic institutions since 2002. These initiatives reflect a growing awareness of the potentially effective role that the international academic community could play in placing the necessary pressure on Israeli academic institutions, and thereby on the Israeli government to end the occupation.

In 2002, British academics called for a moratorium on all cultural and research links with Israeli academic institutions and specifically questioned the special status afforded to Israeli academia by the European Union.¹⁷ Similar boycott campaigns have been launched in France, Belgium and Australia. In addition, there have been on-going divestment campaigns in universities in the United States. Most recently, in 2005, a decision was taken (although later rescinded) by the British Association of University Teachers to boycott two Israeli universities: Haifa University

¹⁵ Omar Barghouti and Jacqueline Sfeir, “Between South Africa and Israel UNESCO’s Double Standards”, Znet, 7 March 2005.

¹⁶ Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) website, “About PACBI”, www.pacbi.org

¹⁷ Israel has preferential treatment as “the first and only non-European country to be fully associated to the European Communities Framework Programme for Research and Technical Development” (http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/israel/intro/#4.2%20Co-operation)

for its campaign of vilification against one its own professors, Dr. Ilan Pappé and MA student Teddy Katz; and Bar Ilan University for its close links with a college in the illegal settlement of Ariel in the West Bank.

While gaining some support in international academic circles, the boycott of Israeli institutions has also been attacked by its opponents for infringing upon the principle of academic freedom. By ‘academic freedom’, it is meant the freedom to publish research in international journals, attend international academic conferences and develop relations with the international academic community. The importance of these freedoms is placed above and beyond the daily violations of much more basic freedoms at Palestinian universities, such as the freedom to physically reach university and to teach and study without fear or harassment. There is an inherent bias in the ‘academic freedom’ argument in this context, in that it regards only the academic freedom of Israelis as worthy: the fact that Palestinians are denied basic rights as well as academic freedom under Israel’s military occupation is ignored. Ultimately, we would argue, the privileging of academic freedom as a super-value above all other freedoms is in principle antithetical to the very foundation of human rights.¹⁸

On the other side of the coin, some Israeli academics have argued that boycott may even help to generate academic freedom in the Israeli context where dissenting views are frequently silenced. Oren Ben-Dor, a British academic of Israeli origin, sees that the boycott of Israeli institutions can actually “provide a means to transcend the publicly-sanctioned limits of debate.”¹⁹

A second argument against boycott is that it isolates and punishes the very section of Israeli society most likely to support the Palestinian cause. This argument is based on the assumption that in general, academics and intellectuals tend to be the most sympathetic to the struggle of the oppressed. However, in the case of Israel, this is simply not true. With the exception of a tiny yet crucial minority, Israeli academics are largely supportive of their state’s oppression or are acquiescently silent about it. Ilan Pappé of Haifa University, who has been severely attacked for his own dissenting views, has stated that out of 9,000 academics in Israel, only 100-150 of them actively voice their opposition to the occupation.²⁰

Moreover, Israeli academic institutions have been and continue to be complicit in the continuing aggressions against Palestinian society. This complicity has been demonstrated in various ways. Firstly, by the fact that the majority of Israeli academics serve in the reserve forces of the Israeli Army, and therefore directly know of and participate in the daily crimes against the Palestinian population. This includes the prevention of Palestinians from reaching their educational institutions²¹ in addition to carrying out many more heinous crimes against the larger Palestinian society.

¹⁸ Omar Barghouti and Lisa Taraki, “Freedom Vs Academic Freedom”, Palestine Monitor, 6 June 2005

¹⁹ Omar Barghouti and Lisa Taraki, “Academic Freedom in Context”, Al-Ahram Weekly, 2005

²⁰ Ilan Pappé, “The Meaning and Objectives of the Academic Boycott”, SOAS Conference, “Resisting Israeli Apartheid: Strategies and Principles”, London, 5 December 2004

²¹ On 1 June 2004, a ‘flying checkpoint’ was placed on the road to Birzeit University, preventing students and faculty from reaching and leaving the University. The authors of this paper were among a group of University faculty and employees who confronted the soldiers to ask them why they were blocking access to education. One of the soldiers admitted that he was a Doctor of Medicine at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The loudest evidence of the complicity of the Israeli universities, however, is their silence. For over four decades of Israeli violations of Palestinian academic freedom and right to education, no Israeli academic institution has ever spoken out. Referring to the total closure of Palestinian academic institutions, Stanley Cohen, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, stated in 1989, “The Ministry of Education, the teachers’ unions and the Israeli university authorities can all be relied upon to keep quiet.”²² Furthermore, Israeli academic institutions are themselves directly engaged in violations of Palestinian human rights and international law. As the independent researcher and founding member of PACBI, Omar Barghouti, has outlined,

The Hebrew University has been slowly but consistently expropriating Palestinian lands and expelling their owners. Tel Aviv University refuses to date to acknowledge the fact that it sits on top of an ethnically cleansed Palestinian village. Bar Ilan University operates a campus on the illegal colony of Ariel near Nablus. Ben Gurion University has supported in many ways the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian Bedouins in the Negev. And Haifa University boasts one of the most racist academics alive: Prof. Arnon Sofer, the infamous “prophet of the Arab demographic threat,” who relentlessly provides academic justification for ethnic cleansing in various shapes and forms.²³

Baruch Kimmerling, a renowned Israeli academic who is actually opposed to the academic boycott writes, “I will be the first to admit that Israeli academic institutions are part and parcel of the oppressive Israeli state that has...committed grave crimes against the Palestinian people.”²⁴

Finally, those who acknowledge the illegality of the Israeli occupation and the complicity of Israeli academics, present the pragmatic argument that boycott simply won’t work. On the contrary, in the context of Palestine itself boycott has been shown to be effective. In December 1989, a recommendation by the European Parliament to freeze funds allocated to scientific cooperation with Israel until it reopened the Palestinian universities, prompted Israeli Defence Minister Rabin to announce the gradual reopening of colleges and vocational training centres in the occupied territories in February 1990.²⁵

Moreover, history has shown that popular international movements for boycott and sanctions are effective in bringing an end to oppressive regimes. The clearest example is the case of South Africa. After calling for boycott and sanctions against Israel²⁶, the South African Security Minister, Mr. Ronnie Kasrils stated, “we in South Africa know about racial oppression. We fought it and defeated it because it was unjust... South Africa is an example of what is possible.”²⁷

²² Stanley Cohen “Education as Crime”, Jerusalem Post, May 18, 1989

²³ Omar Barghouti, “Boycott as Resistance: The Moral Dimension Closing the Door to Oppression”, presented at SOAS Conference, “Resisting Israeli Apartheid: Strategies and Principles”, London, 5 December 2004 (Barghouti notes that the name of the destroyed village is Sheikh Muwannis. He also provides an example Sofer’s research: the “Mitzpim Project,” supervised by Sofer, which calls for the “conquest” of areas populated by Palestinian-Arabs inside via Jews-only settlements and roads. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/481680.html>)

²⁴ Lisa Taraki and Omar Barghouti, “Freedom Vs Academic Freedom”, June 1, 2005

²⁵ Lessons of Occupation, JMCC, 1990, p.32

²⁶ Reuters, “Jewish Minister in South Africa call for Boycott on Israel”, Ha’aretz, 24 April 2002.

²⁷ Victoria Brittain, Welcome Remarks, SOAS Conference, “Resisting Israeli Apartheid: Strategies and Principles”, London, 5 December 2004

Knowing what is possible compels us to raise the issue of academic boycott in the context of a conference on academic freedom. If we are to promote the universal right to education, we have to find ways to guarantee not only academic freedom to Palestinians, but all human rights. The only way to do so is by ending the occupation. The calls for boycott are a non-violent, legitimate means of placing the necessary pressure on the Israeli government to end its violations of international law and to uphold the very principles that this conference aims to promote.

The struggle continues but ultimately there can be no academic freedom without an end to the occupation.