



AN OVERVIEW OF THE PALESTINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Studies that influence our understanding of the Palestinian Higher Education sector nowadays could be attributed to either; a “compilation of raw data” aggregated by International nongovernmental agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank in addition to the annual statistics report issued by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) or the few studies conducted by individual researchers. These studies tend to focus on tangible aspects of higher education and serve the interest of its stakeholders. The Higher Education in the Palestinian territories refers to the educational system governing the tertiary education institutions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These include; traditional universities, universities colleges; community colleges and an open university. The majority of the Palestinian higher education institutions are referred to as public; yet in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of few private universities as well as governmental universities. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) supervise two university colleges in the West Bank and one community college in Gaza strip. Thus there is an emerging need of an academically rigor studies to enrich our knowledge of the higher education sector in the Palestinian territories. This article presents an insight into the Palestinian Higher Education system with special emphasis on the role conveyed by the Palestinian universities as not only centers of learning but symbols of national identity; the political obstacles imposed on the Palestinian universities; the Palestinian Higher Education institutions in 2012 and finally the demographics of the Palestinian students.

Key Words: Palestinian higher education, Palestine, Higher education status **JEL Codes:** C11, J1

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Palestinian higher education system is relatively recent however its contribution to the Palestinian cause and the Palestinians' wellbeing is undeniable. The Palestinian universities in particular have long served the Palestinian people. Despite the unique conditions under which were established; limited financial resources and intentional disruption of their activities by the Israeli occupation, however they managed to abide to their mission to provide quality education to the young Palestinians. The signing of the Oslo accords and the consequent establishment of the first Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education in 1998; provided a platform for them to finally flourish. New facilities are erected, more professors are hired and new programs and modes of study are integrated to the system; paralleled with unprecedented number of students attempting to obtain their higher education at their local universities. Gerner D. J. and Shrodt P. A. (1999) explain how the Palestinians are "among the best educated in the postcolonial world.... considering the difficult conditions under which the Palestinian higher education system has been operating".

This article aims to enrich the existing academic knowledge of the Palestinian Higher Education system since its establishment in the early 1970s till modern day.

PALESTINIAN UNIVERSITIES: FROM CENTERS OF LEARNING TO SYMBOLS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

The history of the Palestinian universities is relatively recent; however their impact on the Palestinians case and wellbeing is undeniable. The political turmoil which characterizes the Palestinian history influenced every aspect of the Palestinians life; including their education and higher education in particular; Shore I. (1996) captures the essence of the relationship between politics and education:

"Politics and education are inseparable. Education is in its essence political because the education process is a meeting place between man and society. Education is a joint development for society and the individuals in it, and the future of both is shaped in an educational process".

The 1948 political dismemberment of mandatory Palestine; into Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had greatly influenced the Palestinian class structure" (Mazawi and Yogev; 1999, 5). The political realities have had the major impact on the Palestinians desire to seek higher education. Abu-Lughod I. (2000, 81); the Palestinian prominent academic and intellectual; describes the reasons encouraging the Palestinians' to seeking higher education:

"Palestinians throughout the Arab region . . . were driven by a combination of motives: indigenous values that emphasized the virtue of learning, which conferred upper-class status on those who acquired the highest level of learning and professionalism; an expanding market in the Arab states, where most of them found refuge (and thus the need for skilled manpower) and, finally, Palestinian recognition that their 1948 defeat (and the defeat of the Arab states) by Israel was in part related to the superior education of their adversary" (Abu-Lughod I. 2000, 81)

The 1950s witnessed the establishment of the two-year colleges through initiatives by individual families; religious foundations or under the umbrella of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) to provide teacher training programs; technical and vocational education such as metal & electrical trades and nursing education (Yusuf M.1979; Hashweh et al. 2003a; Bruhn Christa. 2006a). However it was not until the 1970s that fully fledged universities came into existence. These academic institutions would have a profound impact in shaping the modern Palestinian community over three key periods where their role is described as "bearers of national consciousness, centers of resistance and contributors to state formation" (Bruhn. Christa. 2006b).

The first period extends from 1967 war during which the remainder of historic Palestine fell under the Israeli occupation till the eve of the first intifada in 1986. This period posed a challenge for the Palestinian people at home and in exile to protect what is left of their national identity through organizations and institutions that represents them such as trade unions, women organizations, human rights organizations and most importantly universities. The declaration of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974 which served as the representative of the Palestinian people to recognize the Occupied Territories; known today as the West Bank and Gaza Strip rather than mandate Palestine, as the future site of the Palestinian state where the struggle against the Israeli occupation will be focused encouraged the few then higher education institutes to evolve into fully fledged universities to grant bachelor degrees in arts and humanities; economics, administrative sciences, educational sciences and engineering (Zahlan A. and Zahlan R. 1977, Johnson P. et al. 1986, Hashweh et al 2003b; Bruhn C. 2006c). The universities served as centers of education for the Palestinian youth who previously had to travel to neighboring Arab countries such Jordan and Egypt or to Europe and the United States to pursue higher education. According to Nusseibeh S. and Anthony D. (2007) the main drive to establish all the Palestinians universities was "to provide higher education to students who could no longer travel abroad" (Nusseibeh S. and Anthony D. 2007, 188).

These institutions contributed to preserve the Palestinian national identity during a time when the development of other national entities was blocked by Israel.

The Palestinians regarded their universities not only as “centers of education” but also as "centers of political struggle and national resistance". They laid the foundation for the future Palestinian state and unified all Palestinians descending from different social strata in urban, rural towns and refugee camps into a more coherent environment (Johnson P. 1986). These institutions managed to expand with the financial support channeled from Arab states as well as Arab and foreign universities and private donors through the PLO and the Palestinian Council for Higher Education (Zahlan A. and Zahlan R. 1977b).

The second period in the history of the Palestinian universities begins with the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987 and lasts until the breakdown of talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians in 1992 (Bruhn Christa 2006c).

The universities' role as a hub for national consciousness during the preceding two decades has put them in a leading role during the second intifada. This period witnessed the emergence of the local young Palestinian political leaders who were active members of the universities students' bodies. The local students who lacked political maturity at the time turned to their professors to articulate their struggle for freedom against the Israeli occupation to the world. Mazawi A. and Yogev A. (1999) describes the new role for the Palestinian academicians to stimulate “new political realities, power struggles and gender and class stratification," which led to them "becoming a new center of authority in Palestinian society" (Mazawi A. and Yogev A. 1999). Many of these professors who were active during the first intifada would attain later high profile positions in the Palestinian National Authority such as Hanan Ashrawi; a faculty member at BirZeit University, Abdul Sattar Al. Qasem; a faculty member at Annajah University and Seri Nseibeh; a faculty member at BirZeit University (Bruhn Christa 2006d).

The third period of the Palestinian universities life starts in 1993 with the signing of the Declaration of Principle between Israel and the PLO until the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000. The second Oslo agreement signed in the early 1990' reassigned the supervision of the higher education sector from the Israeli occupation authorities to the Palestinian National Authority PNA.

The first Palestinian ministry of education and higher education came into existence in 1994 and higher education was legalized by law which grants every citizen the right to pursue higher education, “set the legal status of its institutions, and provided the legal framework for its organisation and management” (Hashweh et. al 2003, MOHE. 2008).

The universities were able to flourish and new programs that emphasized technical and vocational education such as banking, commerce, administration, infrastructure and tourism were expanded both on the undergraduate and post graduate levels (Bruhn Christa 2006). The period also witnessed the establishment of new universities and other higher education institutions.

From the 1970s to 2011 the number of higher education institutions in Palestine increased from eleven to 48 higher education institutions between traditional universities; university colleges; community colleges and an open university (14; 14; 19; and one respectively) (MOHE, 2011).

THE PALESTINIAN UNIVERSITIES AND POLITICAL REALITIES

The active role of the Palestinians universities in resisting the occupation; uniting the Palestinian people and preserving their identity and their contribution in building a viable Palestinian state has not surpassed the Israeli occupation authorities. The students' activism would be outlawed and active students or staff would be imprisoned, detained, physically assaulted or even assassinated. Johnson P (1986); reports that; "among the sixty-two Palestinian residents who received administrative detention orders in early September 1985, thirty-three were students. Almost all the heads of West Bank student councils were among the detainees". The academic year would be disrupted and the universities would be closed for weeks; even months by military orders as a form of collective punishment (Rigby A. 1994). The longest shutdown periods sustained by the higher education institutions in Palestine is "the nearly four years closure of several institutions after the first Intifada began in early 1988" (Watzman H. 1993). The occupation authorities banned more than "two thousand books and confiscated educational materials while heavily taxing the population"; Israel also disrupted the flow of financial subsidies to Palestinian universities from Jordan and from Palestinians in the diasporas (Abu-Lughod I. 2000, 88).

In 2010 Lendman S. in the Palestine Chronicles reported that as a result of operation Cast Lead; the term used to describe the Israeli war on Gaza in 2009; "six university buildings were destroyed and 16 damaged....98 students were killed and another 454 injured and five teachers (Lendman, S. 2010).

The Right to Education campaign organized by BirZeit University reports the total number of the university's students who were incarcerated by 2007 to 411 students. The same campaign cites the ministry of higher education's report "The Effect of the Israeli Occupation on the Palestinian Education" which estimates the total cost of damages to university properties as a result of the Israeli invasion to worth 7,888, 133 USD" (R2E. 2010). Taweel H. (2007) notes that "at one point, Israeli military order no. 854 required the universities to apply for an annual permit to operate". Abu-Lughod I. (2000) reports that:

Between 1967 and 1990 "more than two thousand members of the Palestinian cultural, professional, and intellectual elite, including presidents of universities as well as professors and students, were expelled from Palestine. These individuals were "apprehended by the military transported and dumped at the border of Jordan or Lebanon, and not allowed to return to their homeland (Abu Lughod, I. 2000).

THE PALESTINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN 2012

The Palestinian higher education system is comprised of 49 accredited post-secondary education institutions distributed between the West Bank and Gaza Strip; 34 of those are located in the West Bank and range between traditional universities; university colleges, community colleges and an open university (13; 15, 20, one respectively). They offer nearly 300 fields of study to some 21.3973 students; 57% of whom are females (MOHE. 2011).

The institutions employ 14667 staff members between academic teaching staff, academic administrative staff and academic researcher staff (6901, 549, and 26 respectively). These institutions provide programs that range from Education, Arts and Humanities to Natural and Medical Sciences, ICT and Engineering. The Palestinian universities are predominantly nongovernmental institutions; which are referred to as public; “a term that describes their establishment under a public law, not to their type of funding or governance” (Abu-Lughod I. 2000; Taweel H. 2007). The Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE); refers to these universities in its statistical annual report as “Traditional” universities which includes; public universities; governmental universities and private universities.

The Palestinian higher education system is a mixture of approaches “used in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France” (Taweel H. 2007). Altbach P. G. (1979) notes how the colonial powers mainly (United Kingdom and France) imposed their model of higher education institutions in the Arab world as elsewhere:

These models continued to prevail even after Arabic countries gained their independence and the chance to change their university models. In many cases colonizers also destroyed traditional indigenous institutional forms, as the British did in India in the nineteenth century when they imposed European models and ceased to recognize traditional institutions” (Altbach P. G. 1996, 23).

The system is governed on two levels; macro and micro. The macro level refers to The Ministry of Higher Education; The semi- autonomous Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission

(AQAC); The Advisory Council of Higher Education (COHE), The Education Committee at the Palestinian Legislative Council. The micro level refers governing bodies within the institutions which include; The College Deans' Committee and the Boards of Trustees (BOT) for public and Board of Directors (BOD) for private universities

The Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission (AQAC) came into existence in 2002 simultaneously with an upgrade of the ministry's quality assurance system. The commission license HE institutions and accredit HE programs while the Advisory Council of Higher Education assumes only an advisory role, and the Education Committee in the Palestinian Legislative Council has yet to become engaged. The assessment of the performance of higher education institutions in Palestine takes place on two levels; internal and external. The internal assessment involves ongoing process of self-assessment of all stakeholders including students; staff and faculty members, documentation of work on Quality Assurance, identification of poor quality.

The main features of the external QA system are "Compulsory, uses both 'fitness for purpose' and 'standard-based' approaches as appropriate, uses both accreditation and quality audit option, and deals with public and private institutions, university and non-university sectors and all types of academic and vocational programs" (Al Subu' M. M. 2009).

THE PALESTINIAN STUDENTS

The statistics from the Palestinian ministry of higher education and the United Nations shows an outstanding increase in the enrollment rate among the Palestinian youth. The enrollment rate of students' increased by 940% from 1993 to 2011; where the estimated number of students attending HEI in 1993 was 22,750 it rose into 213,973 in 2011. The ministry's statistics shows that for the academic year (2010/ 2011) 56,067 new students (56% Females) enrolled themselves in the Palestinian higher education institutions; 51% of them in traditional universities, 31% open university, 11% university colleges and 8% community colleges (MOHE. 2011). The Palestine Human Development Report (2004) by the United Nations Development Program attributes the increase in women access to higher education to an increase in "social awareness" of the value of women education; while severe economic conditions forced many male school graduates to seek immediate low skill employment (UNDP 2004).

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