

Education under Occupation in Palestine: Resilience and Resistance

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We Palestinians wake up every morning to teach the rest of the world life, Sir.

—Rafeef Ziadeh, “We Teach Life”

Introduction

The estimated rate of illiteracy in Palestine is notably low compared with global standards (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [PCBS] 2022). Palestinians have earned recognition as one of the most educated populations in the postcolonial world (Gerner and Schrodt 1999). The pursuit of education has been deeply ingrained in Palestinian society for many years (Al Hasanat 2022). However, the significance of education became even more pronounced for the majority of Palestinians following the Nakba of 1948. This cataclysmic event left many Palestinians who survived the massacres perpetrated by Zionist groups displaced and homeless in various refugee camps worldwide. Meanwhile, those under Israeli occupation were compelled to adhere to the Israeli educational system, while residents of the West Bank and East Jerusalem followed the Jordanian curriculum, and those in the Gaza Strip adhered to the Egyptian educational system.

Subsequently, after the occupation of 1967, Israel, as the occupying power, assumed control over the educational sector in Palestine. Nevertheless, the Jordanian curriculum persisted in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, while the Gaza Strip continued to use the Egyptian curriculum. Unfortunately, the Israeli authorities neglected to update the curriculum, resulting in an outdated educational system that failed to keep pace with the evolving world (Broco and Trad 2011).

The circumstances of displacement, asylum, and dispossession served as catalysts for what can be described as an “educational revolution” among Palestinians. This movement propelled them into becoming one of the “most educated and skilled societies



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globally” (Hallaj 1989, 100). Despite the hardships of life in refugee camps, schools emerged as beacons of hope, offering a glimpse into a brighter future (Sayigh 1979).

During the First Intifada, which began in 1987, Israel targeted students at schools and universities, subjecting them to arrests and violence. The closure of educational institutions constituted one of Israel’s numerous *collective punishments* imposed on the Palestinian population during this uprising, leading to the shutdown of educational facilities for more than four years (1987–1992). Despite these challenges, the concept of “popular education” emerged, reflecting the people’s deep commitment to education and their determination not to let it falter. Nevertheless, this interruption in formal education impacted an entire generation’s ability to acquire knowledge, develop writing skills, and excel in mathematics (Broco and Trad 2011).

Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1992, the Israeli occupation persisted in targeting students, educators, and educational institutions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This included acts of violence against academic teachers, as well as the destruction of schools and universities. These relentless actions only fuelled the Palestinian determination to utilise education as a form of resistance. This commentary aims to examine, document, and delineate the challenges and violations perpetrated by the Israeli occupation, which obstruct Palestinians in their pursuit of academic freedom and the right to an independent education.

The Education-Identity Dilemma

Since the occupation of Palestine by Israel in 1948, Palestinians have been engaged in a continuous struggle to preserve their identity as an indigenous people, safeguarding it from Israel’s persistent efforts to erase it. Education plays a pivotal role in transmitting the Palestinian narrative to successive generations. Consequently, the Israeli authorities closely monitor the content taught to Palestinian children in schools, particularly regarding the history of Palestine after the Nakba (the catastrophe) in 1948 and the atrocities committed by Zionist groups against Palestinians. Regrettably, any discussion of these topics is categorised by Israelis as “incitement against Israel” and “anti-Semitism” (EU Reporter 2022).

In recent years, the European Union has adopted these Israeli accusations and initiated an analytical assessment of Palestinian curricula through the Georg Eckert Institute (GEI). The results of this study aligned with Israeli criticism (GEI 2021), leading to the European Union’s threat to withhold funding for the printing of Palestinian curriculum books, citing concerns over hate speech and anti-Semitism (IMPACT-se 2022).

For instance, in Jerusalem, schools teaching the Palestinian curriculum have faced closure under allegations of incitement against Israel (Abu Hilal 2023). Conversely, Israeli authorities offer financial support to “upgrade” the educational facilities and infrastructure of East Jerusalem schools, contingent on their adoption of the Israeli

curriculum. In 2018, the Israeli government earmarked 445 million shekels to “Israelise” the education sector over a five-year period, aiming to raise the percentage of Jerusalemite students using the Israeli curriculum to 90%. As an alternative, the Israeli occupation imposed a curriculum that omitted the term “Palestine” and excluded any references to “prisoners and martyrs”, effectively removing any elements they deemed “incitement” against their existence from the school syllabus. Moreover, they scrutinise teaching methods and classroom discussions, including phrases such as “the Israeli occupation of Palestine”.

Similarly, Israeli occupying authorities continue to scrutinise the course content at Palestinian universities. For example, Jerusalemites face prohibitions on employment if they are known to have taught university-accredited courses containing titles such as “Palestine” and “Prisoners”, often facing investigation and interrogation. Even teachers and school principals who permit activities labelled as “incitement” by Israel are subject to arrest. An illustrative example is the case of a principal and teacher from Anata School in Jerusalem who were arrested and tried in a military court due to students presenting a play about Jerusalem, shared on social media, and deemed by the Israeli occupation as “incitement to terrorism” (Arab 48 2022, 1–2).

Currently, Israeli occupying forces are pushing for legislation that would cease recognising Palestinian diplomas, citing concerns that students in Palestinian universities are exposed to content that incites violence (Arab 48 2023). This move would drastically reduce the job prospects of students from Jerusalem and areas occupied in 1948 who study in the West Bank, potentially forcing them into a curriculum aligned with the Israeli narrative (Arab 48 2023). Additionally, this measure would limit their interactions with Palestinians in the West Bank.

Furthermore, students in the Gaza Strip, although holding Palestinian identity cards, are barred from studying at West Bank universities. Conversely, Palestinians with Palestinian identity cards residing in the West Bank are not permitted to enrol in Gaza’s universities.

Homicide and Targeting

Each year, the Israeli occupying forces and settlers tragically take the lives of numerous innocent schoolchildren, university students, and educators. They perpetrate these acts by opening fire and singling them out in their homes, on their lands, and even on the roads connecting cities and villages.

For instance, in the year 2022, more than 18 students, teachers, and school administrators fell victim to fatal shootings by the Israeli occupation forces, with over 91 others sustaining injuries (Ministry of Education 2023). This represents a distressing escalation in the rate of casualties compared to 2021, during which 15 students lost their lives and 3,449 individuals were wounded (Palestinian Ministry of Education 2021). The anguish of loss, suffering, and oppression is experienced daily as families grapple

with the loss of their loved ones. It is worth noting that many of the injured students, afflicted with permanent disabilities as a result of these attacks, face significant challenges in attending school or continuing their education (Al-Rai 2022).

Direct Attacks on Educational Institutions

Israeli occupying forces and settlers frequently target schools and universities, alleging that they incite unrest and protests against the occupation. We will explore various forms of direct attacks on educational institutions.

Closure

The Israeli authorities have a history of closing Palestinian educational institutions. During the First Intifada, all Palestinian universities were closed for an extended period, from 10 January 1988 to 29 April 1992 (Wafa Agency n.d. “Closure of Higher Education Institutions”). Israeli authorities do not hesitate to shut down schools or universities for various alleged reasons. For example, Palestine Technical University—Al-Arroub Branch was temporarily closed in December 2018, citing incidents where settlers’ vehicles were reportedly pelted with stones by university students (Quds News 2018). In Jerusalem, schools teaching the Palestinian curriculum have faced closure, with their operating licences revoked. On 28 July 2022, the Israeli occupation authorities withdrew licences from six Palestinian schools in Jerusalem for teaching Palestinian curricula. These actions are intended to pressure Palestinian schools to exclusively teach the Israeli curriculum.

Additionally, Israel targets schools in areas under its full military control, classified as Area C according to the Oslo Accords. In 2021, the occupation authorities issued demolition notices for 10 schools in these areas alone (Palestinian Ministry of Education 2021). In response, the Palestinian Ministry of Education created “Challenge Schools” in marginalised areas constantly under attack by Israeli forces and settlers (Nassr 2023). These schools, constructed with basic materials such as tin and bricks, have limited facilities.

Destruction

During successive wars on Gaza, Israeli military airstrikes have targeted schools, resulting in casualties among students. Internationally banned missiles and bombs have been employed, depriving surviving students of their right to education. These children are not only deprived of learning as a just human right, but also lose the chance to engage in experiential activities that should shape their childhood, such as painting, playing, singing, and emotional development. Palestinian children are compelled and resilient to adapt to new, potentially distant schools, leaving behind cherished memories (Msdr News 2023).

The Palestinian Centre for Counselling posits that when a student does not perceive their school as a safe haven, especially if they are subjected to pressures that exacerbate their

psychological distress, they may eventually consider dropping out of school and become involved in alternative activities that do not necessarily contribute to their personal growth or meet their psychological and social needs. Consequently, the difficulties arising from unmet student needs have the potential to jeopardise their future prospects, leading to maladaptive coping mechanisms. In many cases, external support and intervention may be required to shield them from the adverse effects of such challenges (Hegazy 2020).

A student's perception of their school as an unsafe environment, especially when experiencing psychological distress, may lead them to drop out and engage in activities that hinder their personal development. Such hardships can have long-lasting effects on their well-being and adaptation. Students often require external support and intervention to mitigate these hardships (Palestinian Ministry of Education 2021). The perilous routes students are forced to take to access these schools are also fraught with danger, as the Israeli military uses these roads for training, leaving behind mines and military remnants. These explosive remnants pose a significant threat to children, resulting in tragic consequences.

Demolition

Israeli military bulldozers and tanks frequently attack and demolish Palestinian schools, especially in areas subject to Israeli confiscation. These brutal actions occur in the presence of students, who are forcibly evacuated from their classrooms. The Palestinian Ministry of Education continually rebuilds these demolished schools, often referred to as "Challenge Schools". Some schools have been demolished multiple times, leaving students exposed to the elements until the schools are reconstructed.

Raids

Israeli occupation soldiers frequently conduct raids on schools and universities. In 2021 alone, West Bank schools were raided 155 times by the Israeli Army (Palestinian Ministry of Education 2021). These raids often disrupt classes, leading to interruptions or closures of schools and universities. They frequently conclude with the arrest and physical abuse of students and teachers, as well as the confiscation of school equipment (Palestinian Ministry of Education 2021)

The Apartheid Wall: A Barrier Impacting Palestinian Universities

Israel has constructed the Apartheid Separation Wall around the West Bank and Jerusalem, which has resulted in severe hardships for Palestinians trying to access lands occupied in 1948 (Stop the Wall n.d.). This wall has had a profound impact on the educational system, particularly affecting 48 schools in the West Bank (Wafa Agency n.d. "The Impact of the Annexation"). Students and educators face frequent assaults, including physical violence, arrests, gunfire, disruptions to classes, and invasive searches at the wall's gates. These individuals are subjected to insults and denied access to their schools for extended periods (Palestinian Ministry of Education 2023).

The Apartheid Wall isolates Al-Quds University because its campus is situated in Jerusalem. Palestinian students holding West Bank identity cards are barred from entering Jerusalem, thereby denying them access to the main campus. While the university has established a campus in Abu Dis, adjacent to Jerusalem, it remains cut off from the city by the Apartheid Wall. The wall looms dangerously close to the university's faculties and stadium. Israeli soldiers stationed in guard towers on the wall frequently open fire and use tear gas against students, preventing them from pursuing their studies and participating in student events and activities like any other individuals. Furthermore, a military guard tower and search point have been established by soldiers at the main entrance of Palestine Technical University in Hebron. These soldiers provoke students on a daily basis, arresting them and using gas bombs against them.

Behind Bars: The Struggle for Palestinian Education

Palestinian child prisoners strive to access education while incarcerated. Statistics indicate that, by the year 2022, 150 children under the age of 18 were held in Israeli prisons (Wafa Agency n.d. "The Prisoner Children"). These children are deprived of their right to education, although they are allowed to participate in the General Secondary Education examination. Other prisoners facilitate their classes for this purpose. The Palestinian Ministry of Education supervises the General Secondary Education examination, overseeing its administration and evaluation. Examination papers are distributed to prisoners and returned to the ministry through the prisoners' lawyers.

In Jerusalem, 600 children are denied access to schools and have been placed under house arrest (Commission of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs [CDA] 2022). The right to university education in Israeli prisons was secured by prisoners after extensive struggles that began in the 1980s. While prisoners were allowed to pursue school and university education from a distance, this was subject to strict and unrealistic conditions. After the Palestinian Authority assumed responsibility for education in 1994, it took charge of school education (Tawjihi), while the prison administration retained responsibility for university education, which was conducted in partnership with the Hebrew Open University (Wafa Agency n.d. "Prisoners in Occupation and Education Prisons"). Between 2006 and 2011, prisoners in Hadarim prison were the only ones permitted to affiliate with Al-Quds University to pursue bachelor's degrees in select specialisations.

In 2014, an agreement was reached between the Ministry of Prisoners and Israeli prison authorities, allowing well-educated prisoners with master's and PhD degrees to affiliate with the Palestinian university Al-Quds Open University. According to this agreement, the university administration sends questions; examinations are conducted in prisons, and answered papers are transported to the universities through their lawyers. However, prison authorities continue to exert control and harass these prisoners by frequently transferring them between prisons, prohibiting the introduction of books and stationery, and limiting their access to lawyers.

Denying Access to Schools and Universities

Movement restrictions, coupled with the daily uncertainty Palestinians face, have instilled fear among students (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] 2018). Israeli occupation forces have established over 700 checkpoints, resulting in Palestinians losing 60 million working hours annually (Arij 2019). These checkpoints impede students' ability to reach their schools and universities. Since the beginning of 2021 and up to March 2022, 452 school students and 99 of their teachers have been detained at checkpoints, while 8,495 school students and 1,064 teachers have been late for school due to these obstacles (Palestinian Ministry of Education 2021).

In Hebron, students attending schools located in the Old City, such as Qurtuba, AlIbrahimiya, and AlFayhaa, must navigate perilous military checkpoints manned by soldiers. Palestinian students are subjected to thorough inspections and are sometimes prohibited from reaching their schools. Settlers also pose a threat, as they attempt to run over and assault students (Miftah 2021). Similar incidents occur in towns and villages frequently targeted by settlers, such as Huwara town, which suffered a devastating arson attack in February 2023 (Al Jazeera 2023).

Students from areas outside the cities where their universities are located must pass through at least one military checkpoint when travelling to their institutions. For instance, students commuting to Birzeit University from the northern governorates of Palestine, such as Tulkarm, Nablus, and Jenin, sometimes spend several hours, up to three or four, at the military checkpoints in Za'tara and Hawara, south of Nablus. Similarly, students from Bethlehem experience lengthy delays at the so-called "container" military checkpoint, the only route connecting Bethlehem and Hebron with cities in the centre and north of the West Bank. Jerusalem-based students travelling to universities in northern and central Palestine must pass through the military checkpoint at Qalandia, which often experiences severe traffic congestion due to the strict measures imposed by Israeli occupation soldiers. Upon their return to Jerusalem, these students undergo thorough body searches, and their bags and belongings, including school books, are inspected.

Students from Jerusalem encounter the same procedures at the so-called "300" checkpoint, located on the lands of the city of Bethlehem, when they enrol in the universities of Hebron and Bethlehem in the south of the West Bank. Students from Jerusalem are sometimes unable to reach their universities and schools due to the closure of checkpoints and the suspension of public transportation during Jewish holidays. As a result, Palestinian universities and schools in the West Bank are compelled to reschedule examinations and coursework to accommodate these interruptions.

Isolation of Palestinian Universities

The challenges facing Palestinian universities are escalating as Israel persists in its efforts to isolate them and restrict their international connections. The scope of cooperation with universities worldwide now depends on the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a non-academic security body. COGAT has issued a 97-page manual, effective as of May 2022, detailing regulations and instructions for the entry of foreigners into Palestinian territories. According to this manual, Israel permits only 150 foreign lecturers and students to teach and study in Palestinian universities. Furthermore, the Israeli government activities coordinator in the West Bank, affiliated with the Ministry of the Occupation Army, determines the specialisations that require foreign academic contracts for Palestinian universities. Foreign lecturers and students must apply to Israeli embassies in their countries, undergo interviews, and await Israeli authorities' decisions on their ability to contribute significantly to higher academic education, cooperation, and regional peace (Hass 2022). This procedure also applies to foreign academics of Palestinian origin with ties to Palestine, including family and property (HRW 2023).

Beyond limiting Palestinian universities' international engagement and cooperation, this decision has far-reaching consequences for education, research, and the role of Palestinians in knowledge production. It places Israel in a dominant position regarding academic affairs and restricts universities' role in Palestinian society (Right2Edu 2022).

Censorship of Educational Materials and Equipment at Palestinian Universities

Israeli military authorities, who control the West Bank, dictate which materials and equipment Palestinian universities can acquire. Israel prohibits Palestinian universities from owning certain equipment essential for mechanical engineering and mechatronics, such as computer numerical control (CNC) machines and various types of drones needed for teaching geographic information systems (GIS) and media studies. This hampers students' exposure to the latest developments in these fields.

Furthermore, Israel places restrictions on the quantities of certain materials required for laboratory experiments in biology, chemistry, and laboratory pharmacology, such as sulphur, phosphorus, and ethylene (Ghaith 2023). For instance, the Head of the Supplies and Purchasing Department at Birzeit University frequently receives inquiries from the Israeli military administration about academic courses using these materials, the number of students, the names of professors teaching these subjects, and laboratory supervisors, along with requests for copies of their identity cards (Ghaith 2023). The Israeli authorities cause delays in universities' access to these materials, often taking many months. This forces universities to procure these substances well in advance, affecting the expiration dates of some materials and rendering them unusable when needed according to course plans (Darwish 2023).

Additionally, Israeli authorities hold some purchased equipment, such as liquid crystal display (LCD) cameras, in airports and ports for extended periods, incurring high storage fees. In many cases, these devices are ultimately returned to the supplier companies. Universities are compelled to attempt to import these supplies via land crossings between Jordan and Palestine, a process that takes several months (Ghaith 2023).

Conclusion

This commentary aimed to provide a summary of the ongoing aggressive actions and violations faced by Palestinian students living under occupation. Despite these hardships, Palestinian schools and universities will persist as symbols of survival and resistance against Israeli occupation (Makkawi 2017).

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