

**Challenges of Higher Education in Palestine – a Personal Experience**  
**2022 Commencement Address**  
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I am pleased to talk to you about my personal experience related to the challenges of higher education in Palestine. This is an experience inspired by many milestones that I went through during my years of studies at the American University of Beirut.

My initial interest in education in general stemmed from my family, which was categorically a believer that education is one of the most important pillars of the advancement of any society. My aunt Nabiha Nasir established the Birzeit School in 1924. This later became known as the Birzeit College. And what I remember from my student days there is the interest in general culture, public good and the wise patriotism.

My interest and attachment to these values increased during my studies for bachelors and master's degrees at the American University of Beirut in the mid-fifties and early sixties in the past century. The public lectures that were delivered by people such as Dr. Constantine Zureik had a great impact on me and on my way of thinking. I also remember with great pride, Dr. Salwa Nassar, who inspired me and inspired other physics students. Note that Dr. Nassar studied in Birzeit in 1938 before completing her postgraduate studies and becoming one of the luminaries of physics in the world.

I completed my higher education in the United States and obtained a PhD in physics in June 1967. That is when the West Bank and Gaza Strip were occupied. Yes, I achieved my scientific aspiration, but my dream of continuing in the research fields in physics was sidetracked into another direction, and my primary concern became to return to my homeland. At the time, I was convinced that every individual outside the country should return to it, if he could, to shoulder his national duty.

I quickly returned to Palestine and found the occupation usurping every inch of our land and controlling education, health and every direction of our life.

Under these circumstances, I restarted working in Birzeit College. I had worked in it after getting my BA from AUB in 1955. At the time, Birzeit College had evolved into a middle-sized university college offering first and second year university education. At the time this was the best higher education available in Palestine

We boldly responded in Birzeit College to this educational shortage. We were three persons working in the administration: Gabi Baramki, Ramzi Reehan and myself. We all graduated from the American University of Beirut. We took a decision to develop Birzeit College into a university. The establishment of a university in normal times is very difficult. How could we create a university under occupation?! Perhaps because of our relatively young age at the time, we opted for the adventure and for taking the educational, national and fateful decision. During the graduation ceremony of June 1974 it was announced that the Birzeit College would become a university immediately.

We faced severe opposition from the occupation authorities. How could we announce this step forward without prior coordination with them? We did not like this at all. Coordination meant submitting to controls that we could not accept. Just as occupation put us in front of a fait accompli in many of its oppressive measures, we wanted to make it face a fait-accompli regarding higher

education. We were no heroes, but we were believers in the great importance of the independence of higher education, as we were believers in the importance of keeping Palestinian students in Palestine as an educated and conscious body that will raise the nation and will not bow to threats of deportation. Birzeit University was established on high academic foundations within concepts of democracy, openness, freedom of opinion and counter opinion.

The university paid a heavy toll for this reasonable educational decision. I was personally deported from the country to south Lebanon in November 1974. The university suffered many closures, raids and arrests among students and professors. In the early years, the days of closure were nearly more than the working days. We started a media confrontation against occupation in UNESCO and international forums. And we succeeded to a large extent. Israel was condemned in these forums. We realized that condemnation alone was not sufficient, but it helped us at the time to overcome many difficulties and oppressive measures of the occupation authorities.

Since its founding, the university made determined efforts to raise its academic standards. But the biggest challenge in that period was to fill the development void in a country under occupation. In the absence of a national government, we took it on ourselves to establish centers as well as research and community institutes that provided necessary services for society, in health, environment, literacy and the like.

The Birzeit College's initiative to develop into a university has contributed to motivating other local educational institutions to do the same. Thus, Palestine came to possess several universities in different regions and these provide most specialties for students. Thus, we succeeded together in supporting the Palestinian people in holding on to their land and soil.

During my forcible period of deportation from Birzeit, I remained in close contact with its University, and I fulfilled all the administrative duties required from a remote university president. This was an inherent part of our challenging the occupation and not submitting to its repressive methods.

I remained in exile until 1993, and I went home with many Palestinians following the agreements concluded at the time between the PLO and Israel. I kissed the land that I returned to after 19 years of exile. I cried with joy for my return to Palestine and I cried with sadness because my homeland was still under occupation!

I returned to my position in Birzeit as head of the university. I discovered that the occupation still sees university education as a great threat to it. The raids of the university campus and the arrests of students and professors continue as if nothing has changed! It may have even gotten worse.

Despite all of this, the university intensified its efforts in holding international conferences. We called on prominent academic personalities such as Edward Said, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Hisham Sharabi to participate in these conferences. We were not satisfied with only the Palestinian elite, so the university was visited by intellectuals from all corners and they met with students and with professors in an interactive and democratic atmosphere - inside the walls of the university. It was really a rich experience of its kind for a society under occupation.

Yes, we succeeded in establishing important rules for higher education. Palestinian higher education institutions succeeded in the ingraining of young generations, and in the provision of political and community leaders from their graduates to enrich the institutions of the country. Despite this, Palestine is still groaning today under the weight of a brutal occupation. But in Palestine there is an asset of women, men, young women and young men who believe in the inevitability of the end of the occupation. Therefore, we have to keep hope and effort entwined and joined, to liberate the country and raise the flag of independence.

I say all this and my heart today is filled with joy to be with you on this joyful day in dear Beirut. Beirut is an integral part of my memory and my scientific and life experiences. As I congratulate you and congratulate your loved ones, graduates, I wish you success in your future life, as I hope that the American University in Beirut will remain an inspiration for you as it was for me over the years.