# Birzeit: The Search for National Identity

## *A university for Palestinian Arabs strives for autonomy under Israeli rule*

Last month Israeli authorities closed down Birzeit University on the West Bank on the grounds that planned "Palestine Week" activities might provoke violence. A few days later, on 18 November, Israeli soldiers shot 11 Arab students in the legs during demonstrations, further eroding an atmosphere already charged with hostility and tension. Birzeit's importance for the Arabs of Palestine is that it is their leading institution of higher education.

Located in a small village some 20 miles north of Jerusalem, Birzeit became a university in 1967. The most prominent of five Palestinian colleges, Birzeit offers several dozen courses in the arts and sciences. It has more than 1000 students and sends a large proportion to graduate schools abroad.

Birzeit's responsibility goes beyond scholarship, according to acting president Gabi Baramki, to whom I spoke before the incidents of November. "We are trying to act in some fashion as the Hebrew University did in the early part of the century," he said, referring to the Jewish institution that now has three campuses, stately buildings, and a reputation for excellence. Baramki's office, by contrast, is bare, framed by plywood partitions, and located in an ancient mansion that houses most of Birzeit's activities. "The Hebrew University set out deliberately to give a national identity to the Jews. The Israelis are now worried that we're doing the same for the Palestinians. I wish we could be as successful." Baramki's daughter Haniah was among those wounded in last month's shootings.

For the first 10 years of the Israeli occupation, Birzeit was a relatively quiet place. Several times a year, usually on the anniversary of some unhappy political event for the Palestinians, students would march through the streets for an hour or two, before returning to class, and some stones might be thrown. For the most part, the Israeli military authorities overlooked these incidents, treating them as harmless high jinks.

But after the victory of Menachem Begin's Likud party in 1977, Jewish settlers began pouring into the West Bank, determined to affirm a principle of Israeli sovereignty. Just up the road from Birzeit, radical Gush Emunim members founded a settlement named Neve Tsuf ("Oasis of Nectar"), and their comings and goings through the university town served as a constant provocation. The students, like the population generally on the West Bank, felt increasingly besieged, and in the ensuing clashes the Israeli army naturally sided with the settlers. Relationships between the soldiers and the students, never friendly, grew acrimonious.

During a demonstration after the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in the spring of 1979, Israeli soldeirs shot a Birzeit student and three townspeople. A few weeks later, after Israeli settlers wounded a student during a street fight, the army closed the university for the rest of the semester. During a protest this spring, Israeli solders invaded the campus, struck Baramki, and broke up university equipment.

With each incident, Birzeit's reputation as a hotbed of extremism spread through Israel. The facts are not in dispute. The army acknowledges that, in its many searches of Birzeit, it has never uncovered revolutionary cells, discovered weapons or explosives, or even found stores of revolutionary tracts. The university, for its part, does not deny that the students are turbulent, throw stones, object to the occupation, and engage in political dissidence. Birzeit's people see this behavior not as rebellious but as an assertion of Palestinian identity.

The position of Israeli authorities on Birzeit is that public order must take precedence over lesser issues such as academic freedom. While still defense minister, and thus in charge of military administration on the West Bank, Ezer Weizman had no hesitation in describing Birzeit in unfriendly terms. He said that the university was a "hothouse" of anti-Israeli sentiment and that its students, backed by extremists in the faculty and administration, were the spearhead of "hostile political activity on the West Bank." A military spokesman in Jerusalem told me that as long as Birzeit's students "misbehave," the university will be subject to military authority.

Last summer, when the Israeli military government withdrew the autonomy of Birzeit and that of the other four Palestinian colleges, all were placed under direct military control. The schools must now obtain annual licenses, which can be revoked at any time by Israeli authorities. The new rules also empower the army to pass on the hiring and firing of faculty, the admission and expulsion of students, and the structure of the academic curriculum, including the subjects taught and the books used.

In announcing the rules, the army claimed that its objective was to protect the local residents from the inequities of substandard education. The Israeli press dismissed the explanation. According to *Ha'aretz*, a respected daily, the military government obviously wanted "to obtain greater control" over the colleges, since they were "well known to provide bases for nationalist activities." Within Israel, it is probable that a popular majority sympathized with the army's action.

Birzeit's board of trustees, supported by student, staff, and faculty councils, protested the military domination. They said that the military government's new code "goes against the legitimate status of the university which it has acquired through its associations with international leagues of universities, and through its academic relationships with respected universities throughout the world." Baramki publicly condemned the measure as "the most serious action by Israeli authorities against academic freedom" since the beginning of the occupation in 1967.

Although the university administration initially promised to resist the new code, Birzeit was in fact calm throughout the early weeks of the fall semester. Baramki complained that the army intruded on the faculty selection process, but the pattern of harassment was not new to him. The military government has long screened reading material addressed to Birzeit. The university is also subject to certain taxes, on lab equipment, for example, from which Israeli universities are exempt. The army does not deny this.

Then, in mid-November, the students, with administration approval, organized a "Palestine Week" with nationalist plays, poetry readings, and songs planned. The army banned the event and


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closed the university for a week. In protest, students organized demonstrations in cities throughout the West Bank. The soldiers shot 11 students when they broke up the demonstrations.

An Israeli spokesman defended the action by noting the difficulty of distinguishing between stones and grenades before it is too late.

Baramki argued that Birzeit's students, being normal young people, cannot be sealed off from the political agenda that affects their lives. "We don't encourage politics," Baramki said. "Since the military government makes it illegal, we don't allow any open politicking on the campus. But, like other universities, we value our freedom and think that students should be free to choose their own direction. The Israelis don't like it, but the student interest in politics is only natural."

Yet Baramki, while disclaiming responsibility for student politicking, emphasized Birzeit's own political duties. Every university is political, he said, in the sense that it must shape the next generation of leaders for the society to which it belongs. For Birzeit, the responsibility is particularly heavy because events have not permitted local leadership to develop normally. Equally important, the society does not have a clear vision of what it wants to be.

Birzeit's special political obligations to the Palestinian people was a recurring theme in the interviews I had with university officials. Muhammed Hallaj, dean of arts and sciences, told me that Palestinian society, which has been forced by the loss of most of its land since 1948 to abandon its agrarian roots, has turned increasingly toward education for answers.

As an uprooted and transient community, Hallaj noted, the Palestinians are obsessed by the importance of university degrees. They look at the dynamic new society the Israelis have created nearby, and they attribute its success to education. Hallaj said that the responsibility of Birzeit, and of its graduates, is to prepare the West Bank for "the metamorphosis from a colonial to an independent community, with as little disorder and dislocation as possible."

Ramzi Rihan, dean of sciences, explained that many of Birzeit's problems are linked to long-standing conflicts that Arab intellectuals face in today's world. For example, Birzeit is sometimes criticized for training too many historians and poets and too few agronomists and rural planners, but the imbalance reflects the Arab intellectuals' persistent aversion to working with their hands. Birzeit is also burdened, he said, by Arabic's lack of many of the logical and linguistic forms needed for modern communication. And yet Birzeit will not go to the other extreme and follow the lead of an earlier generation's intellectuals who, in imitating the West, often abandoned Arabic and Arab culture entirely.

"Our civilization is in a transitional stage," Rihan said, "and no one knows whether it will take ten years or a hundred to make the transition. Something new needs to evolve, not an imitation of the West or an end of the East. We can't engineer cultural synthesis. All we can do here at Birzeit is open the doors and windows and trust that a culture will emerge that is modern and yet firmly Arab."

To a people who have placed an exalted premium on university education, the Israeli military government's action against Birzeit and other Palestinian colleges looks like a threat to the society itself. From the Israeli perspective, suppressing politics at Birzeit is a reasonable means of supporting public order; from the Arab perspective, it is an outrage.

"The Israelis say that everyone in Birzeit is a radical and therefore dangerous," Baramki said to me. "If you mean by a radical a person who feels a strong identity with his own people, then the university, the students, all the Arabs on the West Bank are radicals. But if you're talking about radicals as extremists, as irreconcilables, as uncompromisers, then they are a small minority. I think their numbers may be growing, however, as the occupation drags on and becomes more difficult every day."

Last year, shortly after the military government closed Birzeit, some 60 Israeli intellectuals, many of them professors at the Hebrew University, published a petition demanding that Israel "ensure that the Palestinian Arabs receive the same rights as we demand for ourselves, including the right to a higher education." They were supported by petitions from Oxford, Princeton, and other universities, and by editorials in newspapers throughout the West. The public pressure was no doubt a factor in its reopening of Birzeit. With this latest closing, it is likely that Baramki, in the name of academic freedom, will once again look for help beyond the West Bank.

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## Will Biocommerce Ravage Biomedicine?

Science is hardly a state enterprise in America, but the federal government thoroughly dominates basic research by providing the major share of financial aid in all fields. The government is a distracted patron, however, and evidently needs regular reminders of its duty. Thus a group of recent American Nobel Prize winners paid a ceremonial visit to Congress on 19 November to plug for an expanded research budget. They appeared before a packed hearing of the House science and technology subcommittee, chaired by Representative Don Fuqua (D-Fla.).

The scientists named a couple of special concerns, along with the traditional request for funds. Christian Anfinsen of the National Institute of Arthritis, Metabolism, and Digestive Diseases, winner of the 1972 Nobel Prize in chemistry, voiced a common worry when he said he hoped the Department of Defense (DOD) would not swallow all the discretionary increases in research funding. He asked the subcommittee members to help "play down our DOD and increase our DO-anything else."

President-elect Reagan has said that he plans to reduce federal taxes and the budget while increasing Defense appropriations. About three-quarters of federal spending is fixed by law. Much of the unfixed budget pays for defense. If Reagan is to keep his promise, one quick way to cut costs would be to reduce research budgets, particularly for nondefense-related work. This possibility worries people at the National Institutes of Health because Reagan's team has already said that the parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services, contains several billions of dollars worth of fat.

Several witnesses brought up another concern—that university research centers are being depleted because they cannot compete with business in attracting and keeping talented scientists. Val Fitch, chairman of Princeton's physics department and a winner of the 1980 Nobel in physics, said that people with technical training are in such short supply that holders of new bachelor's degrees are "being offered positions


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