

alhal

Birzeit ... our beloved

Birzeit University has always been a mother and will remain so: a mother who rears her children on freedom and boldness, 'a mother of leaders'.

Like all mothers, she is saddened if her son is disobedient. Yet she feels happy from within to watch him fight for something, to use tools that may injure him before harming others, knowing that this is the best way to engage in life and to learn.

Freedom has a cost which the University, its administration, academics and students are aware of. The Birzeit University campus, its streets and alleys, which have always been a refuge for students, are testimony to the first lesson in the handbook of freedom: respect for others.

Like all mothers, Birzeit knows that her son will eventually be back in her arms. Like all mothers, she forbids sometimes only to relent [afterwards], and is stern but sympathizes and becomes compassionate [later].

Like all mothers in our home country, she says: My son, I want you to be strong, but do not weaken me, I want you to be victorious, but do not crush me, You may disagree with me, but do not chain me.

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After 28 days of closure with chains, an agreement to end the crisis has been reached and life has returned to Birzeit



Rami Hajjaj

On Monday 26 September 2016, life returned to Birzeit University after the gates had been closed with chains to prevent administrative and academic staff from entry for 28 days in a protest by the Student Council against a rise in tuition fees.

The late start of the academic year may require measures to make up time by extending the semester or cutting short the holidays between the two semesters; any measures will be announced later.

The debate between the University administration and the Student Council was moderated by the Union of Teachers and Employees of Birzeit University and put an end to the crisis by an agreement consisting of seven articles. It provided that a raise of two Jordanian dinars was approved for a credit hour for new students, given that the President of the University would guarantee financial assistance for new needy students of an equivalent of one JD for a credit hour upon their request for financial assistance as required by the University. The decision to raise fees per credit hour for existing students was revoked and financial aid shall be provided for students incapable of paying their fees if they request financial aid as required by the University. It was agreed that the University would pledge not to raise tuition fees for four years starting from the 2016/2017 academic year. Any rise must be negotiated later in a committee representing all components of the University prior to the approval of any new hike.

The reaction of students to this agreement varied. One student stated that "the agreement provided a solution, but not a magic one and it should not have required such a long strike to achieve this solution". Another student cheered the University administration for such a bold decision, though it came a bit late to salvage the semester. Basil Alroujoub, representative of the Fatah Youth Movement at Birzeit Student Council, explained: "Both new and old students must be exempt from the rise in tuition fees. The agreement reflects only part of the ultimate goal, which is to put an end to raising fees. This is why the University was closed with chains".

According to Alroujoub, the Student Council "did not win" this round of negotiations, especially as there was no agreement on several demands that led to the strike taking place: the cancellation of the second summer term; the conditions for exceptional students to be exempt from tuition fees; and the fees charged by the University for issuing official documents for students.

The President of the Student Council, Ahmad Ayesh,

sees the University's pledge not to raise tuition fees for the coming four years, and only in consultation with all parts of the University, mainly the Student Council, as an achievement in itself.

Ayesh said: "Some committees are expected to be formed after the agreement to consider all the issues that were not agreed upon and which were postponed in order to start the current semester. There are 18 issues pending that need to be resolved. A joint committee comprised of the administration and the Student Council will be formed to discuss these and resolve them by the end of the first semester of this academic year".

Mandella Salem, the representative of the Progressive Democratic Students, is a member of the debate committee. He described what took place as an 'agreement of principles' initiated by the administration to end the crisis and resume the academic year. All members of the Council were satisfied with the agreement reached with the administration, apart from the Fatah Youth Movement, although their representative, Salem, emphasized that disagreements would not damage the unity of the Student Council. He said: "What distinguishes the Council this year is that it is united and is therefore the sole and legitimate representative of students".

The Dean of Student Affairs, Mohammad Alahmad, said that the agreement was concluded to maintain the rights and interests of students and to ensure academic continuity at the University.

Life has returned to the University. The semester may be extended for days or weeks to compensate, or the holidays between the first and second semester or the second semester and the summer term may be shortened. The administration has not discussed this yet but it will be considered soon.

Measures against the government will also be considered. The government will be under pressure from universities, student councils, university staff and trade unions, as per one of the articles of the agreement, to urge the government to pay the dues owed to universities.

The former Vice-President for Development and Communication, Dr. Ghassan Khatib, said: "The government is not a key player in the crisis that Birzeit University witnessed". He explained that "the aid provided by the government is basically limited. At its best 78-years ago, the government's contribution to the University budget was only five percent at most. Later it dropped to one or two percent".

He added: "The volume of government assistance is

not significant for the University budget. Palestinian universities are not state universities and are not attached to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, which usually plays no substantial role in resolving problems at universities".

Khatib believes that the most that can be asked from the government is the reimbursement of the budget allocated to universities. The government "usually allocates \$20 million in its annual budget for higher education institutions, but they pay \$12 million at best. The share allocated to each university varies according to a formula devised by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education".

Omar Rahal, Director of the Human Rights and Democracy Media Center - Shams, appreciates the broad space for trade union activity in Birzeit University during past decades compared with other local, and even international, academic institutions. He pointed out that this University was always the cradle of student movements in Palestine, but had witnessed a breach of "red lines" during the recent crisis.

He told al-Hal: "Academic freedom and trade union activities are available in universities. Birzeit University in particular allows for greater freedom of opinion and expression, attributed to it being a liberal institution. However, it has never happened in the history of student movements that the University is closed to its people. This is an academic space and issues should not be tackled in such a manner".

The Dean of Student Affairs, Mohammad Alahmad, commented: "One of the reasons for raising tuition fees is the agreement concluded with the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions last March, whereby the payroll increased to over JD 10 million (by JD 2 million a year over five years). Thus, the sum required by the University to cover its annual expenses rose, combined with shrinking government assistance that barely covers the electricity bill".

Statistics issued by Birzeit University Public Relations Department illustrate that the government subsidy declined from about JD 2 million in the 2010/2011 academic year to less than half a million Jordanian dinars last year in 2015/2016-. The Dean of Student Affairs explained that 4000 of 12000 students enrolled in the University are provided with full or partial grants by virtue of efforts exerted by the University administration to attract student grants. In addition, another 1200 students fail to pay their tuition fees. "All this is rewarded by closing the gates with chains. We will not prevent a scientist from reaching his laboratory or a researcher from getting to the library!"

An exclusive interview with al-Hal

Erekat: If the French initiative is rejected, we will work towards an international conference

- I have no intention or desire to succeed the President and my dream is to teach at the university again.
- In the name of Fatah and Hamas, I reject the term 'management of the division' and we should elect a new Central Council.



Interview conducted by: Bayan Quraan and Ali Thabteh

Saeb Erekat, head of the Negotiations Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said that the PLO views the French initiative as an international call to restore Palestine to the map and to inform Netanyahu that it is impossible to maintain the status quo. He stressed that if Israel rejects the initiative, the Palestinians will demand an international peace conference and will call upon France to fully recognize the State of Palestine.

Erekat explained that the PLO is considering the idea of suing Britain for the Balfour Declaration as a message to the world that it is time to establish the State of Palestine according to UN Resolution 181 on the Partition of Palestine.

Erekat stated that he has no intention of running for presidency. His lifelong dream is to continue to serve Palestine as a soldier and to return as soon as possible to his teaching profession at the university.

These excerpts were taken from an interview conducted for al-Hal with Saeb Erekat, head of the PLO Negotiations Department. The following is the full text of the interview.

Q. After the Arab welcome for the French peace initiative during the recent Arab Summit, what is the fate of the initiative and the likelihood of Israeli acceptance, especially after Netanyahu's rejection of any preconditions to restart negotiations?

A. First of all, it must be made clear that the French initiative is to establish an independent State of Palestine based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and maintain the two-state solution on the 1967 borders, given that the status quo cannot continue forever. As the French President Francois Hollande expressed in his speech at the ministerial meeting held in Paris on 3 June 2016, there will be no victory over terrorism without ending the Israeli occupation. We are fully aware that the map drawn by Sykes-Picot one hundred years ago is no longer viable; this is seen in what is currently happening in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and other countries where a new geographic map is being drawn now by Kerry and Lavrov rather than Sykes and Picot. We are putting forward the French initiative because France has said that any new map that does not include the State of Palestine on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital means another hundred years of disaster. However, we must understand the strategic landscape of states. It is not possible for France to do anything contrary to the United States because it is an ally; this is a reality because France exports to US markets totaled \$140 billion in 2015 and more than 80 French planes land at

US airports every day. Therefore, we as Palestinians, as the PLO and as the State of Palestine, view the French initiative as a meaningful way to restore Palestine to the geographic map and inform Netanyahu that this situation cannot continue as it is. Just as we propose a strategy, Netanyahu has his own strategy of maintaining the status quo on the ground through one state with two regimes: the State of Israel and an Arab minority which will be granted, religious, economic and educational rights, or so he claims. When France says this is not acceptable and an independent State of Palestine must be established, we as Palestinians and Arabs grabbed this initiative which will create a new international framework.

Q. What is the fate of the initiative if it is rejected by Israel?

A. If Israel rejects the initiative, an international conference must be convened and France should seize the initiative to recognize the State of Palestine on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. Britain, Germany and other countries must do the same and must boycott Israeli settlement products. They say they are fighting terrorism; we the Palestinian people have suffered most since occupation is the greatest form of terrorism. Therefore, whoever wants to fight terrorism must start by draining the swamp of the Israeli occupation.

Restoring the power of the PLO

Q. What are the causes of the stagnation in the political programs of Palestinian political parties, the retreat of secular and left-wing parties and the rise in popularity of Islamic ideological parties, and what options do these parties have to regain their popularity with the Palestinian public?

A. We in Fatah believe deeply in Palestinian democracy and we believe that if we disagree we can go to the ballot boxes and not to bullet boxes. The PLO reflects the Palestinian political fabric of several factions and stances. Therefore, if it is the citizen who determines which party will serve his interests, we in Fatah declare that we only exist to restore Palestine to the world map and serve the Palestinian people in all continents.

There is no such thing as "management of the division"

Q. Some say that the division has become comfortable for both Fatah and Hamas and that it serves the interests of both factions to manage this division without any serious intentions of ending it. What is the Fatah position?

A. In the name of both Fatah and Hamas, I reject such allegations. Yes, there are difficulties and problems but it is nonsense to talk of being comfortable with the ongoing division while our national project is in danger. I am talking here in my name as a member of Fatah Central Committee. We [Fatah] were born as the sons of the

Palestinian people only for the purpose of restoring the State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, to the map. Yes, there are deep differences between Fatah and Hamas, but ending the division is a crucial demand to maintain the Palestinian national project. Fatah was never slow in this aspect. In my capacity as Chairman of the Supreme National Committee responsible for the International Criminal Court, we have members from Hamas, the Popular Front, and all other parties and factions, including NGOs. We have proved that political partnership is possible and that Palestine and Jerusalem are more important than any political faction, whether in the PLO or not. We must keep in mind that the creation of those factions was only for the purpose of putting Palestine back on the map with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The legal case against Balfour

Q. The Palestinian Authority has announced that it intends to submit a lawsuit against Britain for issuing the Balfour Declaration. What are the chances of winning such a case, and what are the anticipated benefits to Palestinians?

A. The State of Palestine and the PLO are not seeking revenge but seek justice for our people. The Balfour Declaration is associated with the British Mandate of Palestine and with UN Resolution 181, whose provisions were half enforced and others were not. Now we are seeking justice through the International Court of Justice and British courts. We are telling the world that the time is overdue for the enforcement of the other part of Resolution 181 relevant to the establishment of the State of Palestine on 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. Our people have every right to use all legal means possible. We are proceeding on a dual track: the portfolio of the Balfour Declaration associated with the British Mandate and Resolution 181 to achieve justice for the Palestinian people, which is freedom and independence within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as the capital.

The International Criminal Court portfolio

Q. As Chairman of the Supreme National Committee to submit lawsuits to the International Criminal Court, what is new in this portfolio?

A. We have achieved a lot to be proud of during the past months. This Committee reflects the political partnership of all factions, including Hamas, and I am honored to preside over the Committee with Dr. Ghazi Hamad as spokesman. Watching members at work, I do not think about if they are from Hamas or the Popular Front or something else. All I know is that they are Palestinian. We look forward to the International Judicial Council making a decision and opening investigations on lawsuits related to the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip, Israeli settlements and detainees.

Are wives in Palestine treated unjustly by the legal system?

Farah Almasri

Hanan is a wife in her twenties. Before earning the title of 'wife', she had no idea about what marriage entailed other than what her mother told her.

Hanan was completely unaware that this title would impose duties upon her without any legal rights, as per the religious definition of marriage.

Like many other women, Hanan wanted to be an obedient wife and win the approval of her husband and society for adhering to social norms as a 'sensible woman'. The task of women is confined to bearing children and serving the husband by tending to his desires and demands. In this way the woman is immersed in her duties and neglects her personal human needs.

Who is to blame?

Many women suffer from societal restrictions, backed by a traditional culture that marginalizes women by belittling their role as an active member of society capable of contributing and building in a public space as much as in the private space.

After a review of certain laws, Al-Hal found that the blame does not fall only upon the community, which is a male-orientated in nature, but also on the law that upholds this culture rather than curbing it or ending the violation of women's rights. Activists see the laws in force in Palestine as treating women in the legal context as a 'possession'. Article 2 of the Personal Status Law of 1976, in chapter one on marriage and engagement, stipulates that marriage is: "A contract between a man and a woman where she becomes legally his, to form a family and have offspring".

Commenting on this legal definition of marriage, some legal workers describe it as insulting for women, especially treating her as a man's possession as if the primary purpose of marriage was no more than 'pleasure'.

For forty years the Jordanian Personal Status Law has remained in force and was adopted by the Palestinian Constitution without even the tiniest amendment to its articles that discriminate against women. The question remains: why is an old Jordanian law that has been amended in Jordan still in force in Palestine without any changes whatsoever?

Palestinian Personal Status Law

Amal Khreisheh, a feminist and political activist, said: "The basic problem in this regard is that we as Palestinians lack a personal status law of our own. We still use the Jordanian Personal Status Law of 1976 to regulate relationships between individuals in their private sphere based

on erroneous interpretations of Islamic Sharia (law)".

Khreisheh wondered: "Why should laws be derived from religion? Religion is an individual personal choice and must not reflect on the law".

She added that the definition of marriage in the Personal Status Law has been applicable for about half a century. "It deals with women as the personal property of a man. It also implies several insulting contexts in many ways. It reflects the backwardness of the socio-economic and cultural system prevailing at that time and which is incompatible with the current reality".

This feminist rejects the text of the law that stipulates that a woman becomes legally owned by a husband by virtue of the marriage contract. "This seems like a man is buying a woman when they marry, which is incompatible with the basic concept of marriage as forming a family based on equality".

Khreisheh calls for "changes to several laws that provoke and insult women, including this definition of marriage that conflicts with all the international conventions approved by the Palestinian Authority, notably CEDAW which provides for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women".

Lobbying to change the law

Amal Khreisheh explained that feminist and legal institutions are leading lobbying to advocate legal amendments and the enactment of a new Palestinian law based on equality between men and women.

Some activities have succeeded in "tinkering" with the reality pending amendments: changes have been made to some laws such as raising the age of marriage for women and a woman's right to khula' [divorce initiated by the wife].

According to Khreisheh, the main reason for the absence of a serious movement to change the law is the suspension of the Palestine Legislative Council, as well as the cultural discourse that stereotypes the role of women and impedes any measures to make radical and substantial legal amendments.

Khreisheh indicated that some Arab countries have attempted to make "fundamental changes to laws that are hostile to women in line with commitments in CEDAW".

A contract to have sex

Youth activist Mohammad Abdo agrees with Khreisheh and confirmed: "The current concept of marriage is as a contract to have sex and create a family. This is a big mistake because if this was the purpose of marriage, dozens of young men would terminate the contract with their wives and remarry".

"The Holy Quran and the sunnah of the Prophet, used by many to justify such a definition, do not see marriage as serving only to satisfy sexual drive, but view it as a participatory relationship for all aspects of life based on love and understanding rather than a woman surrendering and subdued to her husband for sexual purposes. If this was the case, there would be no stability or harmony between spouses".

An opposing opinion

Attorney Naim Alsharif says that the law stipulates specific terms prior to concluding a marriage contract in order to ensure justice for women. Most importantly, the couple to be married should be two consenting adults, the two witnesses to the marriage contract are 'legally qualified' and that the contract is registered in a Sharia court.

Alsharif believes that the law "focuses on the need for equality between men and women, in particular upon marriage because it requires the consent of the woman, giving her the right to add any special conditions to the marriage contract". He pointed out that "a number of things may cause the contract to be annulled, primarily a lack of legal competency, i.e. if the woman is less than 15 years of age or the man is less than 16 years, or if the husband is not mentally stable or the marriage was coerced. In such cases, the marriage is considered void and legal intervention takes place".

The opinion of Islamic Sharia

The former Grand Mufti of Palestine, Ekrima Sabri, said: "The concept of marriage in Islamic Sharia is wider and more comprehensive than the law in guaranteeing the rights of both the husband and wife".

He added: "Islamic Sharia views marriage as a sacred bond that joins the spouses. The hadith of the Prophet Mohammad focused on the need for harmony between spouses in marriage due to the importance of their roles in building a family on strong solid foundations, which has immense rewards".

Islamic Sharia also focuses on the prominent role of a mother in managing the family. Islam relieved women from jihad (fighting) because they carry out a parallel role by bringing up children and building a sound family that is the foundation of a healthy society, according to Sabri.

The Grand Mufti cited from the Hadith Qudsi about the good behavior required of a husband towards his wife: "He who respects them is honorable and he who insults them is mean". This emphasizes the need to respect women and ensure justice for them.



Gaza: A workshop for shoe manufacturing facing a slowdown in trade.

Imported products hammer the shoe industry in the Gaza Strip

Manal Yasin

The shoe industry is one of the oldest in Palestine and one of the most important inherited professions. The 'Queen Shoes' factory for shoemaking is evidence of this traditional industry. Starting as a small workshop, it developed over time to become a factory meeting all the needs of the Gaza Strip market. It is now run by Ehab Sakallah who has worked for 28 years alongside his father, who inherited the trade from his own father.

Rizek Naim has also worked in the shoe industry for about 20 years. He owns a small workshop that once had 35 workers: now there are only five workers left. Abdel Karim Basal is the owner of a shoe workshop. Although he is a university graduate, he has worked in this profession for the past 15 years to preserve the craft of his predecessors.

The Israeli blockade puts the Gaza Strip between a rock and a hard place.

The Gaza Strip has been languishing under a severe Israeli blockade since 2006, strangling vital industries, including the shoe industry. The blockade has prevented shoemaking from expanding beyond a simple craft with limited production to become a developed industry using machinery and modern equipment to make mass quantities of shoes rapidly.

Sakallah said: "We use old equipment because we are not allowed to bring in modern equipment due to the Israeli siege and the complications it poses. Certain types of leather are not available, nor do we have the glue used to stick the soles of the shoes as it cannot be imported into the Gaza Strip".

Naim points out that the glue has been

banned from the Gaza Strip for the last eight months: "We rely on the stock available in the Gaza Strip. But the bigger problem is that the price of a container of glue that used to cost NIS 220 has risen to NIS 8001000-.

He added that they face problems importing moulds for shoes: "We used to travel to Egypt and buy all the raw materials that we needed, but the blockade and border closures have had a significant impact on our work".

Imports hit the markets

Browsing the Gaza Strip markets, you can't help but notice the cheap imported shoes that are endangering the national shoe industry.

Sakallah, Naim and Basal all agreed that in spite of the high quality of their products, the imported products invading the markets at low prices are the main obstacle to the continuity of this industry.

Sakallah said: "We attempted to fight the imported products by reducing our prices for a shoe to between NIS 35 and NIS 40, but this is not the optimal solution".

Shoemakers confirm that the open market policies for imported products have resulted in national products being replaced and the closure of many shoe workshops.

Naim said: "Our daily production totaled 500700- shoes, but since imported products entered the market, it is a maximum of 50 shoes a day".

Basal added: "Our previous production cannot be compared to what is produced today in terms of quantity and marketing. The biggest problem we face is that imported products are much cheaper than our national products, which are higher in quality and price".

Public trust in national products and the desire to learn the profession.

Shoemakers complain about the lack of public interest in their local high-quality products. Basal indicated that many people remain unaware of the existence of the shoe industry in the Gaza Strip. He also noted that customers want cheaper prices due to the poor economic and living conditions in the Gaza Strip.

At the same time, Naim commented: "Thirty workers worked with me as apprentices but they have all given up the profession since the imported products entered the market".

Sakallah said: "New generations do not want to learn shoemaking because they do not see any future for this profession". Almost all indicators point to this industry coming to an end if its problems are not addressed seriously to restore its status.

The role of relevant parties in the protection of the shoe industry. Engineer Baha' Aljadbah, head of manufacturing industries at the Ministry of National Economy, said: "We adopted new measures to restore the shoe industry and we agreed in a meeting held a while ago to apply Palestinian specifications to many products that enter the Gaza Strip. In the coming period, these will be applied to shoes to restrict imports and prevent poor quality goods from entering the market".

Baker Haboub of the Palestinian Federation of Leather Industries stated that imported products are the biggest problem facing the shoe industry. The Federation has called upon the Ministry of National Economy to find a solution that will prevent the destruction of the national industry.

Haboub added: "The Federation asked the Ministry of National Economy several times to rescue the shoe industry in the Gaza Strip. At the very least, we call for fees and tariffs to be lifted from raw materials to encourage local products".

The Israeli occupation is a barrier preventing the entry of raw materials classed as 'dual usage'. Aljadbah commented that the only measures adopted by the Ministry of National Economy to address these problems has been to make special arrangements to bring limited shipments of raw materials into the Gaza Strip, although none have been allowed in since the beginning of this year.

On suggestions of a quota to curtail the entry of imported shoes into the Gaza Strip market, Aljadbah said: "We have attempted that previously on more than one occasion and are trying to impose some restrictions on imported products, but we cannot prevent them".

Haboub said: "There is no regular follow up or addressing of our problems by the Ministry of National Economy. Our demand is that restrictions be placed on imported products. Imports of goods similar to those that are manufactured locally must be prohibited in order to boost the national industry".

Aljadbah referred to a meeting to be held soon by the Ministry of National Economy with businessmen and manufacturers in the leather industry to examine their problems and look for appropriate ways to revive the shoe industry.

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