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## **EDUCATION AGAINST ALL ODDS**

*The Palestinian Struggle for Survival and Excellence*

*Q. Tell us a little about who you are, about some of the most significant milestones in your personal/professional life. Locate and position yourself within the socio-political and historical movements that define who and what you are, and where you 'stand'.*

I was born in Jerusalem on November 3, 1929 into a Christian family whose roots in Jerusalem-Palestine go back for at least five hundred years as far as the records of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem could tell. My father studied architecture at the Fine Arts Academy in Athens and was amongst the first architects in Palestine during the British Mandate. His style in architecture combined the Arabic arch with the Greek Corinthian column heads and his unique style spread not only in Jerusalem (one can see many of the houses he built still standing in the new City of Jerusalem, now known as West Jerusalem) but also in Ramallah and in some neighbouring villages.

I was sent at the tender age of five to the boarding school of Birzeit which was one of the very few national, non-governmental secondary schools established in a rural area. At the time national or private schools were few anyway and mostly in Jerusalem. The only government school—The Arab College—was in Jerusalem and top students from the primary government schools from the rest of Palestine were sent to it.

I enjoyed my life at Birzeit School but still missed my parents, family and Jerusalem. Coming home to Jerusalem for vacations was something I always looked forward to. I enjoyed accompanying my father to the old city to buy fruits and vegetables and where I learned from him how to buy the right kind of lamb meat from the meat market. Our centre of life in Jerusalem had always been the YMCA where boys and young men (prior to 1948), be they Christians, Moslems or Jews, interacted freely and played together without ever feeling any barriers. On Saturdays, the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (Arabs and Jews) would perform in the open air and on Sundays, the clock bell tower would chime lovely music. However, during the 40s (WWII) the Palestinian Arabs and Jews started growing apart as Zionist activities were increasing: illegal Jewish immigration, terrorist attacks against the British and Arabs, and establishing Jewish-only settlements with the idea of founding a Jewish National home in Palestine and thus displacing, rather than living

with, the Palestinian Arabs. Nevertheless, in Jerusalem social relations among some Jews and Arabs continued. I remember how much compassion we felt for Jews who escaped the persecution in Europe when we got to know them socially (often because of work connections with my father with some of them who worked for him as foremen or draughtsmen). This feeling of compassion was mixed with the feeling of anger and fear that these people are after all, Zionists who want our land without us in it.

*Q. What have been some of the most formative moments in your own education? Here you can also tell readers about the individuals, movements, organisations, etc that were most influential in shaping your development as an educator/scholar/citizen.*

The period when I was a boarding student at Birzeit High School (renamed Birzeit College in 1942) was one of the most formative periods in my education. Here I learned discipline and how to adjust and to live in a community. This meant being considerate of others and being sensitive to their needs, thinking of the public good and putting it above one's personal needs. I got to love nature and to appreciate team work as a tool for success. My talents in singing and theatre were also developed in this atmosphere. I also learned how one can enjoy the simplest of things including enduring living under harsh conditions. We had a laugh when the roof of our dormitory leaked in winter, telling our parents that Birzeit now had running water in every room. We still make fun of the occupation, and that allows us to endure it. It was in this school that I received my first lessons in Arab nationalism in its broad sense. Our history teachers taught us Arab history and how we should take pride in our heritage. Our school song called for Arab unity and it was in so many subtle ways that one got the spirit and sense of identity and love of country.

When I was still in high school trying to hold my fort in the study of chemistry at the university—while my parents wanted me to study medicine, which is the usual expectation with parents of children who are good at sciences—I got the advice of a young friend of the family who had just graduated from the American University of Beirut (AUB) with a BA in Chemistry: 'One should study the subject that one likes and not the subject that suits others even if one can do well in this other field.' I developed this further myself and continued to give this advice to my students and anxious parents: the major you take up will stay with you all your life and if you like it you are bound to excel in it and that will give you happiness rather than leading you to boredom and mediocrity. So when I graduated from Birzeit College in 1946 and obtained the Palestine Matriculation Certificate, I was ready to go to AUB to study chemistry without any problem. At that time, students with the Palestine Matriculation certificate entered the sophomore class, which meant that at the end of the year I received the Associate degree in Science and went on to the junior and senior classes to obtain my B.A. degree in Chemistry in 1949.

During my second year at the AUB, we heard the devastating news about the UN partition plan of Palestine (UN Resolution 181). All the University students went on demonstration in Beirut once or twice, but classes soon resumed normally. During

that year I was getting news from my family about their moving from our house to another, supposedly safer place, in the German Colony close to where my uncle's family was living. After a few months however, the news of the Deir Yasseen Massacre spread—about 200 people, men, women and children from this village close to Jerusalem were slaughtered by the Irgun Jewish terrorist group. My parents decided that it would be safer to go and stay in Birzeit at the College, in an area where my aunt and her family, the Nasirs, lived. When the school opened, they went to Gaza where they shared renting a house with another refugee family from Jerusalem as houses for rent in Gaza were scarce at the time. Eventually when they could not go back to their house in Jerusalem, my father took a job with UNRWA in Gaza as an engineer and the family found a suitable house to rent. We joined thousands of others as Palestinian Refugees.

In my senior year, I received a tuition scholarship from AUB as most Palestinians were cut off from their families and sources of income. I graduated from AUB and got a job as assistant instructor at that University and that was how I found myself in the teaching profession without ever having thought about it. I learnt a lot from my students, who were not much younger than myself, and started enjoying teaching and also thought about how to make learning enjoyable for my students. In 1951 I started work on my MA at the University while teaching. I received my MA degree in 1953.

During my AUB years there were opportunities that I took advantage of to satisfy my interests. I joined AUB trips during Christmas vacations to the Cedar Mountains and learned skiing. It is true we occasionally had snow in Jerusalem and Birzeit, both of which are about 800 meters above sea level, but it was the first time that I saw so much snow and in such a beautiful setting with thousand year-old cedar trees. That helped me when I went to Montreal, Canada in 1957, where snow is the normal setting for at least five months of the year. I also joined a choral group and a music club where I got my first taste of listening to opera. The head of the chemistry department at AUB, professor W.A. West, was an avid hiker and I joined the hiking group which regularly went on hiking trips in the beautiful Lebanese mountains. Hiking was again a hobby that stayed with me. I passed on this interest to my students and colleagues when I joined Birzeit as a teacher and administrator and we went exploring the Palestinian mountains in our area which is just as beautiful as Lebanon, though with less water. From my experience at AUB and later at McGill University I always give the message to my students who go to study abroad: take the full advantage of your stay overseas, not only by gaining as much knowledge and expertise as you can from the university and its professors, but also by taking part in the other extra-curricular activities that are available, as these will be valuable to you and will enrich your personality. It was at AUB that I first experienced democracy through student elections and the process that led to them.

After four years of teaching and administration at Birzeit, I received a fellowship to study for my Ph.D. I chose McGill University where a friend of mine was studying Neurosurgery there and he advised me to go there myself. McGill to me was a new experience. 'Shopping' for a supervisor for my Ph.D. was fascinating. Meeting

graduate students from all over the globe coming from different backgrounds was a new rich interesting experience to me. I met Hungarians who were worried about the invasion of Hungary by USSR, I met Pakistanis and Indians who came from a war zone, I met Chinese from Hong Kong who had family in China that they could not see, and of course I met Canadians. I learned about their national and political problems as they learned about mine. I found that most of them knew very little about my case (Palestine) and I found myself often having to start from below zero. I needed to correct wrong information that was fed to people by the media which, in my experience, is generally pro-Zionist. It helped that I did not fit into the picture they formed from the media about ‘terrorist Palestinians’ who wanted to throw the Jews into the sea: I was 6ft 4 tall, light-skinned and Christian. Nobody knew the fact that two-thirds of the Palestinians were thrown out of their country by Zionists forces in 1948. What I got from my stay at McGill and in Canada in general is the value set on research and scientific work but how little is known about foreign countries, and in our case how much distortion we are subjected to so that we appear as ‘terrorists’ and criminals and the Israeli Jews as the victims: this is not simple ignorance, but prejudice against us. I realized how much work Palestinians have to do to educate the masses and to reach those who lead in the West. I learned that people can communicate easily and freely, in spite of differences in backgrounds, cultures, political and national problems, because people as humans are equal.

When I came back to Palestine in 1953 to work at Birzeit College, the West Bank had become part of the Kingdom of Jordan. The Jordanian Government set the goal to put all children of school age into schools. That meant the need for a large number of teachers to carry the load. The government established two-year teacher training colleges as an urgent measure and sent the top school graduates to AUB for higher education, as the first university in Jordan was not established until 1963. When Birzeit started its freshman class as part of the Junior College in 1953, it was not a common event. There was only one Junior College in the whole area and that was Aleppo College in Aleppo, Syria—an American College, recognized by AUB. Its students could therefore easily transfer to AUB and other American universities. At Birzeit, that was also our plan, but it took us nine years before our students could transfer directly with full credit to AUB. Prior to that, students had to sit for full entrance exams to get into second or third year at the university. Co-education was also a first at Birzeit. We had mixed classes at the high school level but male and female students had their separate campuses after school. As we started the Junior College we had to start carefully into getting a full co-educational system with mixed theatrical and musical plays—not a common happening at the time. The dormitories were separate, of course.

My mentor when I started my work at Birzeit was Musa Nasir, the principal and co-founder of Birzeit School and College. From him I learned the elements of public administration and the leadership and planning of an educational institution that always needed public support, especially if one insisted on high quality and excellence. I learned a lot from my students and colleagues and appreciated the need

to keep one's ears open to listen to criticism and see how elements of this criticism could be used in a positive manner to the benefit of the institution. I took after my father in being compassionate with my students and colleagues, as he was with his employees as a successful contractor.

After the occupation of the rest of Palestine in 1967, the College continued its work and later decided to develop into a full four-year College and later to a University with programmes in Arts, Sciences, Business and Engineering and a graduate programme in Education. In November 1974, the Israeli military authorities deported Dr. Hanna Nasir, who was the president of the University at that time, and I took over the running of the University and continued to do so until his return in 1993. During this period, the university grew and developed into the leading Palestinian university. Our graduates stood out as leaders in their communities and were able to do well in the best universities abroad. I played a major role in both keeping the spirit of the university and in leading the University in the right direction: training the students in the practice of democracy, non-violent resistance, putting public good ahead of personal interest and respect for community work. There was a rich extra-curricular programme which helped in building the well rounded personality of our graduates.

I am an independent Palestinian Arab nationalist, strongly attached to the land of our forefathers. I am an educator who helped build and develop the higher education system in Palestine, and a founding member of the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel Campaign which started in 2004. Perhaps one of the most important organizations that influenced me as a person and a citizen is the Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs and particularly its long-serving presidents, Dorothy Hodgkin, a Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, and Joseph Rotblatt, a Nobel laureate in Peace. It is through the Pugwash Conference that I became more aware of the responsibility of scientists in resolving conflicts by peaceful means and the role scientists play in the development of weapons of mass destruction and hence their ethical responsibility for using their knowledge for the elimination of such weapons, eventually leading to a war-free world.

I, as part of the majority of Palestinians, felt that to end occupation and obtain our freedom we must fight for it. The issue then becomes what kind of fight. I chose resistance and fight by non-violent means as Gandhi did in India and Mandela in South Africa. In each of these countries you had a power with a formidable and well-trained army controlling and oppressing the indigenous population, just as in our case. However the similarity stops there as in none of these cases was the power interested or intent on displacing the population and 'importing' people from all over the globe to settle them in the land that is cleansed from its original inhabitants. I know that Israel depends a lot on world support and thus, we need to address first the international civil society and academics, and we can only do that by convincing these groups of the seriousness of the problem and the violations Israel committed and continues to commit against us. But we cannot do that while we are also violating human rights by attacking civilians even though Israel is committing crimes against

our civilian population. The world is waking up and I think it is just a matter of time before Israel will have to be held accountable for its crimes against humanity and justice will be done and peace will follow by ending the Israeli occupation of our land leading to the establishment of a state in Palestine where all people have equal rights including the right of return for the Palestinians who were expelled or left their land and property during periods of war. I am amongst the leadership that works with the civil society towards this end.

*Q. What are some of the key educational 'problematics' that currently preoccupy you? How are these linked to the broader preoccupations you may have about society? What is your response to these problematics and preoccupations, as a scholar and as a citizen?*

The problems in education that have been mounting during the last fifteen years are enormous and one does not know where to start. Let us say that, if any good came out of the Oslo agreement of 1993, it is the fact that the Palestinians took charge of the education portfolio and that, for the first time ever, they had the chance to prepare their own school curricula and to run their education system. However, Israel, still as the controlling power and with the upper hand, realized the importance of education for self-determination and independence and put all kinds of obstacles to hamper this operation:

[a] Funding: Israel started to hit on sources of funding for the curricula and textbooks on the (unfounded) grounds that in Geography and History textbooks there is incitement against Israel. As an example, in the Geography of Palestine, we use the Palestine under the mandate map, and Israel would say that we did not recognize Israel's existence. We responded by asking what borders we should use, as Israel has not yet set its official borders. Luckily, the EU as the major donor investigated the matter and realized that the allegations of Israel and Israeli settler organization that started the allegations, were unfounded.

[b] Closure of some schools during the second Intifada and occupying the schools for the use of the occupation army during certain operations.

[c] Erecting check points between cities and villages, often leading to complete siege of certain villages—leading to the inability of students of all ages to reach their schools or universities. These check points reached a total of over 600, dispersed all over the West Bank. How these check points help Israel's security is something that I cannot fathom. On the contrary, these checkpoints provide less security for Israel as they create frustrations and anger leading some people to take violent actions.

[d] The 'Apartheid Wall' which Israel calls the 'separation fence', is a wall of concrete slabs as high as 8 meters that is built mostly on Palestinian land occupied in 1967 and often comes between students and their schools in a neighbouring town or village and between farmers and their fields. The Wall winds in such ways as to annex to Israel most Israeli settlements (which are illegal according to international law), as well as most of the areas in the West Bank which have the underground water tables. It is 900 kilometres long, compared to the borders between Israel and the

Palestinian territory on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1967—the so-called Green Line—which are only 300 kilometres long.

All these issues come at a time when the Ministry of Education is trying to cope with ever-increasing demands on education: the building of schools, and the recruitment of more teachers to meet this demand. This puts pressure on the budget that is mostly dependent on external donors—a source that is not always reliable, making it difficult to plan far ahead.

Of course, under these circumstances, compromises have to be made: quality of education suffers as a result of the increasing students/teacher ratio and crowding of facilities.

I have not mentioned in all this the siege on the Gaza Strip which has been going on for four years now. The siege is a collective punishment that is considered by the international community as a war crime. This siege, where Israel controls what material enters into Gaza, has affected education in several ways: simple things as pencils and writing papers were not allowed in. Travel restrictions affect students wishing to go abroad for further studies, or teachers who wish to go for self-improvement or for carrying research with colleagues abroad; it also affects the ability of universities to develop and update their laboratories. Of course, the 2008 attack on an already besieged Gaza made things much worse, given the destruction of its infrastructure and a number of schools and university buildings.

These are problems directly related to the Israeli harsh occupation and will end only when occupation ends.

In addition to all the above, I must add my concerns about two major issues not related to occupation: the quality of higher education and the high percentage of high school graduates opting for academic rather than vocational and technical education (VTE). The trend in Palestinian society has been to concentrate on academic higher education, resulting in a great deal of pressure on universities to admit ever-increasing numbers of students without providing the required physical facilities or the number of qualified faculty and staff to maintain a reasonable quality of education. This led to the overloading of the faculty with teaching hours, thus reducing their ability to carry out research of reasonable quality, if at all. Thus the quality of programmes, by and large, has suffered significantly in the last decade. A major cause is the lack of finances available to enable the universities to attract the qualified teachers needed to improve the student/teacher ratio and to make progress in the research output. For a developing country like Palestine, poor quality of education is highly detrimental and affects negatively the development of the country.

The other issue which is related to the first is the low proportion of high school graduates enrolled in technical and vocational schools. Not enough tertiary TVET institutions are available, but the major reason is the lack of proper guidance at school and at home to direct students to the TVET sector. There is a social/psychological factor as well, that may be common in developing countries where the prevalent idea is about the superior social position of university graduates over

TVET graduates, which makes the university education the first choice of high school graduates, with only a few enrolling in TVET colleges as a first choice. This has also led to some of the two-year colleges to strive to upgrade to four-year programmes not out of necessity as much as out of prestige and the ability hence to attract more students to these schools. The cost-benefit of such an upgrade is questionable in most cases.

These two issues need a policy decision which should be accompanied by a financial commitment to support tertiary education and to link this support with quality. Support from donor countries should include a well planned manpower development programme whereby top graduates are sent abroad to select universities to receive the training and education and come back to serve in the country.

There have been several studies about TVET which the Ministry of Education should start implementing seriously, committing an appropriate budget both for manpower development (including training) and for building and equipment.

*Q. What are your reflections about the major forces that are shaping educational practice in your country/region? What are the dynamics and interests that underpin these forces, and what kinds of challenges do they represent for the articulation of an education project in your country/region?*

In my country—Palestine—education, whether primary, secondary or tertiary, is a top priority for every family to the extent that it is almost an obsession. This came as a result of the dispossession of the large majority of the population by the Zionists in 1948 who managed, through a major ethnic cleansing operation, to expel two thirds of the population. These people, bereft of their land and earthly possessions, became refugees in the neighbouring countries living in a state of statelessness. This is when the value of education became apparent since those who had nothing but their education were able to manage and succeed in starting a new life. Palestinians learned the hard way that education is a valuable commodity that, once possessed, cannot be taken away from them.

At the same time all countries in the region were experiencing for the first time freedom from colonialism, and governments were aware of the importance of education for development and for preparing the cadres for self-government. As the Palestinians had no country of their own with the exception of what was left of Palestine (which, in 1950, became part of the kingdom of Jordan), they helped in this process of development. As skilled and educated workers they played a major role in developing these countries and these workers became the major source of income for the families left in the refugee camps. Throughout this period the Palestinians depended on the neighbouring Arab countries—Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan—for providing university education, and therefore felt no pressing need for starting universities of their own. However, after the war of 1967, when the rest of Palestine was occupied by Israel, and the travel of young people from the occupied territory became a harrowing and humiliating experience, the need arose for establishing universities in the occupied Palestinian territories in spite of the



difficulties put in front of them by the Israeli occupation authorities. By 1993 eight universities were established and operated on a non-profit basis, with major funding for the running expenses coming from the PLO and a small part from fees paid by students.

During the 70s and 80s the liberal democratic atmosphere was dominant at the universities. With the formation of the Palestinian National Authority, the university campuses gradually underwent unwelcome changes: factionalism increased and students tended to increasingly resort to violence as frustration mounted. The high hopes of liberation and state formation were shattered as the West Bank and Gaza were littered with check points that made simple communication and movement of people and goods a traumatic experience. Israeli violence mounted with increasing violations of human rights, expropriation of land, the building of more settlements, and Jewish-only roads to secure these settlements, settlers' violence against the Palestinian population and against olives and other fruit trees (cutting, burning), the Apartheid wall—all this happening while our Palestinian Authority stands helpless. All this raised the level of anger to a degree that violence replaced reason amongst some students. I must hasten to say that this is not the general state of affairs but the gradual change might be indicative of a trend that might reach alarming consequences if the political situation continues to deteriorate. There is now though, a movement to adopt non-violent resistance among the civil society and student population in particular. This may not be related to student violence, but it could affect it especially with signs of success of non-violent protests abroad that could affect the situation at home.

*Q. Which recent developments/innovations in the education sector in your country fill you with hope in terms of furthering the agenda of democracy, and of equity? Which recent developments do you feel most critical of, and why?*

The establishment of Centres of Excellence in the Palestinian universities is a development that should be commended. The Quality Improvement Fund (QIF) established with the help of the World Bank, not only helped in the creation of these centres, but also helped to bring about better and stronger cooperation amongst the local universities. This cooperation is an important and healthy development which was missing at the early stages of the development of the universities. Another interesting development is the introduction of e-learning in several universities. This is a relatively new development in Palestine and not only does this help overcome the issue of road blocks and difficulties students meet in getting to their schools or universities, but it also allows the introduction of new methods of learning and is especially helpful for teachers to improve the quality of learning not only at the high school level but also at the university level where it hardly existed before in this area. This matter meets some resistance on the part of some administrators, but has proved its effectiveness when applied in government schools and training institutes.

I am not happy about the trend of expanding graduate programmes where quality is not up to the level expected, as qualified faculty members are not available in

sufficient numbers. Qualified faculty are overworked and hence cannot give the time needed to produce outputs of good quality. I am worried that the economic factor of admitting a large number of students (who pay tuition fees in excess of the cost in these programmes), plays a major part in the decision to open such courses. The need for the programmes could be there, but without adequate number of qualified faculty there is no justification for such a development. Another matter of great concern to me is the poor linguistic skills amongst graduates. Students are admitted in increasing numbers from government schools where the level of communications skills—particularly in English—is rather poor. The universities are hardly doing anything to improve this, and universities which in the past paid more attention to English, for more than one reason, have dropped the matter of remedial courses in English that ensured the adequate standard of graduates in that language. I believe that the mastery of a second language, in our case English, is essential for enabling the graduates to have access to the up-to-date information and developments in their fields and in the world. In this age of globalisation, English is an important tool that would give the person an edge when competing for jobs or for being a leader in his or her community, able not only to communicate with fellow countrymen but with the world at large.

*Q. What comments would you care to make about the impact of globalisation and/or regionalisation (e.g. Europeanisation) on educational development in your country/region?*

For a small country like Palestine, networking amongst universities with the outside world was vital for their development and survival. It was therefore imperative for the universities to follow programmes that allow their graduates (or even undergraduates) to transfer to higher levels of undergraduate studies, or graduate studies abroad without losing credit for the work they did. We therefore followed the credit hour system which suited us and was more flexible. Fortunately, with globalisation, European universities with the advent of the European common market and later the European Union, pressed for better mobility amongst their students and that helped us also. Palestinian universities later established a network with the European universities (the Palestinian European Academic Cooperation in Education—with the appropriate acronym PEACE Programme) in 1991. This enabled our students to pursue higher degrees, and our faculty to carry out joint research programmes, at the universities that were members in the network which reached over 40 European universities.

With student mobility becoming easier amongst the region and the wider world—especially with Europe and the US—it was imperative that standardization and assurance of quality at the universities be properly attended to. The Ministry of Higher Education established the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission as an independent Unit to support this endeavour. This commission became a member of the International Quality Assurance Agencies network. Thus, because of globalisation, the monitoring of quality of programmes at the universities made

mobility amongst students even more meaningful and will serve to promote understanding and better communication among universities worldwide. In my opinion this is an important and very positive development that came about through globalisation. It will take time to make sure that all the programmes in all the universities meet the requirement of quality, but this is already happening and will gradually become a part of the development process.

No doubt, students and graduates of Palestinian universities will benefit from this development as it will improve their competitive ability in the bigger job market and will help in their mobility among universities abroad. Faculty members of Palestinian universities equally benefit from this trend as it improves their ability to carry out research with colleagues from other universities abroad who are part of the network. It also allows faculty members from European universities in the network to join their colleagues in Palestine to give courses or to carry out joint research in Palestine, thus allowing them to get to know our situation first hand. This is a matter of great importance as it contributes to international understanding, and to a just and peaceful resolution of the conflict in our region.

#### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS BY GABI BARAMKI

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