A Report on MLA Members’ Visit to Palestine
June 2016

Introduction

We begin with our departure. At the end of an eight-day tour of Israel and the occupied West Bank, where we have been exploring the conditions under which Palestinian scholars have to work, we take the circuitous journey from Ramallah to Tel Aviv that Palestinian vehicles are obliged to follow. On the perimeter of the Tel Aviv airport, our Palestinian taxi driver is directed to pull over and get out of the van. His ID is from Ramallah. Right there on the sidewalk, in full view of whoever might be looking, he is made to drop his pants. No screen, no booth, nothing. When he returns to the cab, the driver tells us that this sort of thing happens all the time, and he drives us to the terminal. For him, this is routine. We are appalled. What we witnessed concurs with evidence in a recent report on occupied East Jerusalem, which says that “the young women talked [with us] about being stripped of their veil by police and soldiers, witnessing the humiliating undressing of men in public by police and soldiers, and more.”

Underwear would be a persistent theme during our time in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Two Palestinian faculty members, one man and one woman, from a West Bank and an Israeli university respectively, told us that their underwear, whether clean or dirty, had several times been pulled from their baggage and held aloft for general inspection by airport security. Another senior faculty member reported to us that on more than one occasion, when he had to go to apply for one of the innumerable permits that dog Palestinian daily life at an office of the Israeli Defense Forces that governs the occupied West Bank, he was forced to strip to his underwear on the public street before being allowed to enter the building. It does not matter whether you are a taxi driver, a faculty member, or a senior university administrator: deliberately humiliating searches are a constant risk of daily life.
Throughout our fact-finding trip, we heard evidence such as the
stories told above about what it is like for Palestinian faculty and
students to live under Israeli occupation. We also learned about
the difficulties of getting and providing quality education in an
environment that often frustrates the desire of students to learn
and of faculty to teach and guide them. For those who will be
voting on the MLA resolutions about the academic boycott
of Israel in support of the goals of the Boycott Divestment
Sanctions (BDS) movement, we provide this eyewitness report so
that MLA members can hear what Palestinian and Israeli faculty,
administrators and students have to say not only about academic
boycott but also about what conditions for education are in the
West Bank and Israel for Palestinians who work and learn there.

What We Went To Find Out

Academic freedom and the right to education are universal rights
rather than privileges contingent on the advantages of
location. Accordingly, our concern should extend as much to those
whose circumstances are rarely discussed as to those whose
relative privilege allows them every opportunity to present their
own case. Debate on the boycott of Israeli academic institutions--
not only within the Modern Language Association, but in almost
every American scholarly association that has contemplated
endorsing the Palestinian call for such a boycott--has almost
always focused on the impact that such a boycott would have on
Israeli and American scholars.

The concern most frequently expressed is that an academic
boycott will infringe on those scholars’ academic freedom, on
their rights to research and to association, on their freedom to
travel and collaborate, to publish and present their
work. However, the Guidelines issued by the Palestinian
Campaign for Academic and Cultural Boycott (PACBI) clearly state
that individual scholars are not subject to boycott simply by virtue
of being employed by an Israeli institution. The Guidelines
distinguish consistently between an individual and institutional
boycott; moreover, the Guidelines explicitly state that Israeli
scholars are entitled, as employees and taxpayers, to receive
funding from their government or institution “in support of
academic activities such as attendance of international
conferences and other academic events.”

Despite this key clarification, some Israeli scholars remain alarmed

1 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, In the Absence of
Justice: Embodiment and the
Politics of Militarized
Dismemberment (Jerusalem: UN
Women, 2016), p.22. [Reference
is to material on the previous
page.]

2 The guidelines can be found at http://
www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1108
at the idea that their institutions might be targeted by an international boycott. And many U.S. academics worry that the boycott might lead to an unacceptable restriction on our Israeli colleagues’ academic freedom, not to mention our own. Such expressions of collegial concern, however, too often serve to mask the difficult and deteriorating conditions under which our Palestinian colleagues and their students daily labor. Although occasionally we hear corresponding concerns about the ongoing curtailment of Palestinian academic freedoms under occupation, rarely have the concrete conditions under which Palestinian academics, students and university administrators function been presented in any detail to members of our association. Our own investigation was motivated by the belief that documentation of the conditions under which Palestinian academics and students are obliged to live, study, and conduct research is indispensable for deliberating about the justice of a boycott of Israeli universities as a means to redress these conditions. That the vast majority of Palestinian academics has called for this boycott makes it all the more incumbent on us to investigate these conditions and hear these colleagues’ voices.

The opportunity to do so presented itself to us through an invitation to visit Palestinian universities extended by a senior administrator at Bethlehem University, also a member of our Association. Our group, which was not an official delegation, took this opportunity to travel to Israel and the West Bank at our own expense in order to meet with students, faculty and administrators at various universities. Our basic question for the Palestinians students and educators was simple: what is it like for Palestinians to have to function in a university under the conditions governing academic life both in Israel and in the West Bank? We also wanted to hear directly from all of our Palestinian interviewees—both those from the Occupied Territories and those who are citizens of Israel—about their thoughts on an academic boycott of Israeli institutions of higher education: whether they supported such a boycott, and whether they thought that implementation of this boycott by the international community was likely to be effective. We also sought out the views of Jewish Israeli academics who oppose the occupation and/or state policies, since their positions on boycott are often assumed to be known in advance. This was important in light of the frequently heard argument that the boycott would actually be counterproductive, that it would only further diminish the power of the Israeli left by weakening an essential locus of critical discourse, the university.
Scope

This report is a record of our findings. It does not aspire to replicate the length and detail to be found, for example, in the 120-page report produced by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) or the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) Report.⁴ We invite Interested MLA members to consult these documents, especially that of the AAA for its detailed bibliography and very useful ‘historical timeline’ section. There is also a growing bibliography to consult.⁵ The AAA and BRICUP delegations were official, and responded to explicit charges given to them. We, in contrast, are a group of six individual MLA members, in various disciplines and at different stages of our careers, who are broadly sympathetic to the BDS movement but were aware of a critical lack of first-hand knowledge about the opinions and working conditions of our Palestinian colleagues. We seek to share our findings with our colleagues in the MLA so that we may all be better informed as we debate the boycott resolution currently under consideration.

Our trip took place from June 15 to June 22, 2016. Owing to constraints of time, geography, and restrictions on travel, we could not speak to representatives from every institution where Palestinians work and study. There are about a dozen universities and colleges on the West Bank, of which we managed to visit five of the largest, from the north to the south of the country. In the course of our trip, we visited the Palestine Technical University-Kadoorie in Tulkarem, a principally agricultural and engineering school that serves around 7000 students; An-Najah National University in Nablus, the largest Palestinian university with about 22,000 students; Birzeit University, a non-governmental public university located near Ramallah, serving about 8500 undergraduates and 1500 postgraduates; Hebron University, which has some 10,000 undergraduates, and Bethlehem University, a private Catholic foundation with about 3300 students. At each university, we met with a cross-section of administrators, staff, faculty and students, principally from humanities departments, and were shown the facilities and physical plant. The people with whom we spoke were usually fluent in English and were chosen by the administrators who had kindly responded to our letters of inquiry. We also visited an elementary school in a village near Hebron, where we spoke with two teachers, the principal, and a tenth grader who joined our conversation. We had three meetings in Israel: at the Arab Center for Applied Social Research in Haifa, where we met with Palestinian Israeli academics from the Hebrew University, Mada al-Carmel University, and Ben Gurion University; at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem, where we met with both Palestinian and Jewish Israeli academics, students, and activists from Tel Aviv University, the Hebrew University and Bar Ilan University; and at the Rosa Luxembourg Center in Tel Aviv, where we met with a group of Israeli academics, students, and activists from Tel Aviv University, Ben Gurion University, and Bezalel Art Academy, as well as several Israeli academics living abroad, but in Tel Aviv temporarily. As noted above, our research took us both to Israel and to the occupied West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem. Given the fact that


⁵As good places to begin, see Edward Said, From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map (Vintage Books, 2004); Saree Makdisi, Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation (W.W. Norton, 2009); Eyal Weizman, Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation (Verso, 2007); Ilan Pappé, Out of the Frame: The Struggle for Academic Freedom in Israel (Pluto Press, 2010) and The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine (Oneworld Publications, 2006); and Raja Shehadeh, Palestinian Walks: Forays Into a Vanishing Landscape (Edge, 2008).
the call for an academic boycott explicitly addresses not only the impact of the occupation on the Palestinian Occupied Territories but also the situation of Palestinian citizens of Israel itself, we felt it was crucial to get the perspectives of Palestinian academics and students in both territories.

We could not go to Gaza, where the destruction of educational institutions of all levels during incursions by Israeli forces in 2009, 2012 and 2014 has been amply documented. Nor could Gazan residents come out to meet with us due to the severe restrictions on travel imposed by the Israeli blockade. We did, however, speak with many people with close relatives and former students in Gaza and heard vivid reports about conditions there.

Findings

In every interview we conducted with Palestinian faculty, teaching staff, and administrators, we heard that they find it very difficult to work in postsecondary educational institutions, whether they are working within institutions in Israel or within West Bank universities. There are differences between the problems experienced in Israel and in the West Bank, and differences among institutions and how they experience the effects of the occupation, as one might expect. We were reminded by a faculty member at Haifa University that Palestinian student and faculty experiences vary greatly across regions, institutions and their own backgrounds. She insisted upon a nuanced and careful analysis of the Palestinian situation. But it became clear to us by the end of the week that it is always a question about the different kinds and degrees of discrimination Palestinian academics experience, not about whether or not they face discrimination. The exceptional cases of Palestinian faculty who succeed in making careers within Israeli institutions (comprising less than 2% of Israeli faculty), or of West Bank students who manage to study abroad, do not outweigh the vast majority of instances in which Palestinians’ aspirations are frustrated and their dreams denied, any more than the notorious instance of the “exceptional black scholar” undoes the legacy of racial preferences in our own institutions. As one Palestinian scholar who had gained tenure at an Israeli institution put it, “Our success does not mean the system is not discriminatory.”

In answer to our question, “What is it like for you to be a teacher, a student, an administrator, a scholar,” we received many specific details. But without exception, and often with considerable passion, the Palestinians to whom we spoke confirmed what we

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Our success does not mean the system is not discriminatory.”

Palestinian tenured academic, Israeli university

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noted above: that Israeli control of the places where they live and work makes their lives and work extremely difficult, and at times nearly impossible. Whether they were talking to us about access to libraries and archives, the right to conduct research freely, the daily commute between work and home, travel to conferences, participation in Student Union activities, attracting a variety of students to their schools, applying for tenure and promotion, university entrance examinations, the admission of foreign students or even just about what it is like for them to be on campus, the colleagues with whom we spoke all said that the work they want and love to do is severely controlled by the Israeli state and its security forces to a degree that is hard to imagine beyond the borders of Israel and the West Bank.

Life for Palestinian Educators and Students Within Israel
The first part of our visit was spent in Israel (often called by our Palestinian interlocutors “48 Palestine,” alluding to the borders of the state of Israel that existed officially between 1948 and 1967). Demographically, some 20% of Israelis are Palestinians. They lack full “democratic” rights: they are citizens but not “nationals” of a state where nationality rather than citizenship determines access to privileges and rights. They do not simply constitute a minority; they constitute a demographic group whose very existence and potential equality are perceived as a threat to the integrity and identity of the state. According to the Israeli-based human rights organization Adalah, more than 50 laws discriminate against Palestinians in Israel. As we noted above, Palestinians currently compose roughly 2% of the faculty in Israeli universities (e.g. 20 out of 1400 at Hebrew University). There are no Palestinians among the 107 members of the Israeli Academy of Science.

Unequal Access to Resources
Above and beyond socio-economic disparities, conditions for Palestinian students in Israel are made very difficult. At the elementary and secondary level, there are separate systems of schooling for Arabic and Hebrew speaking communities. Arab schools receive only a third to a half of the funding that Hebrew schools do, but all university entrance exams are taken in Hebrew.

Barriers to Education
Higher Education in general is conducted in Hebrew; we were told that even Arabic language courses are taught in Hebrew. Jewish students can enter kindergarten at 3, Palestinians only at 5. Palestinians must delay entering the universities until they are 21, in order to mesh with those Jewish students who are coming out of their two years of military service. Many potential students end up taking jobs rather than waiting to enter university, thus further diminishing the percentage of Palestinian students in institutions.

7See the Adalah data base for discriminatory laws at https://www.adalah.org/en/law/index. Adalah is the name for The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel.


in Israeli institutions. Financial aid is significantly tied to completed military service, and is thus unavailable to Arab Palestinians (though not to Christian Druze). We were told that some Palestinian students living within walking distance of Hebrew University were made to pay foreign student tuition, because of the policy that categorizes Palestinian natives of Jerusalem as “residents” rather than citizens.

There are other barriers to Palestinians who try to get a university education in Israel. According to Palestinian educators whom we met in Haifa, college eligibility rates are 47% for Jewish and 23% for Palestinian students. Unsurprisingly, many Palestinian students feel pressured to study abroad, or at West Bank universities (but there too there are serious access problems, as described below). Palestinians report being prevented from writing their dissertations in Arabic; and indeed there is current discussion about Israel's no longer recognizing Arabic as an official language or at least raising the proficiency bar for Hebrew.10

Intimidation and Surveillance

The general militarization of Israeli society extends onto university campuses in ways that are often experienced as intimidating by the Palestinian faculty and students with whom we spoke. Israeli faculty and students commonly show up on campus in military uniform, sometimes carrying guns. Palestinian professors must teach active-duty Israeli soldiers, who sometimes are disruptive, bringing weapons to class, intimidating Palestinian students and faculty members on campus and sometimes videotaping their lectures. One professor described an encounter with one of her own students driving a bulldozer that was in the process of destroying Palestinian homes. Another professor told us about encountering a former student who, as a member of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), was involved in policing actions on campus.

Palestinian faculty members reported high levels of official and unofficial surveillance in the classroom, and “zero” administrative responsiveness to attacks on their freedom of speech and instruction, often conducted by organized groups like the radical Zionist student group, Im Tirtzu. As one Palestinian faculty member at the Hebrew University put it, “You are going to be recorded, and you have to qualify everything you say.” Palestinian faculty at Israeli institutions report open discrimination in research funding and assistance, permission to travel, and career progress (tenure and promotion). One faculty member told us that there were

“It is hard knowing your own students are being recruited [to the military] and could shoot you or strip you.”

Palestinian faculty member, in Israel

threats from the university administration to withdraw research funding if the results presented an unfavorable picture of the Israeli authorities; such threats clearly impose considerable pressure not to conduct research on Palestinian culture and society since the research would almost inevitably be critical of the state. Residents of the West Bank cannot travel to Israel without special permission. The travel restrictions make conference planning and research projects difficult, because it is not possible for faculty members in Israel to invite professors from the West Bank as visiting speakers or conference attendees or to have West Bank researchers travel to Israel to participate in research projects. Residents of the West Bank cannot study in Israeli universities, an example of what is called “localization,” about which we will say more below.

Life for Palestinian Educators and Students in the West Bank

Student Arrests and Detention

Difficult as conditions for Palestinians in Israeli universities may be, those for Palestinians working in the West Bank are significantly worse. Almost every university we visited had a monument to students killed by the IDF in the course of incursions on campus. The military authority that governs the occupied West Bank makes frequent use of the category of “administrative detention” whereby Palestinians can be jailed for up to 6 months without charges. These detentions are renewable and are commonly not directly related to alleged, provable criminal acts but instead seem designed to incarcerate potential community leaders and to send a threatening message to anyone who might emerge as a leader in a future Palestinian civil society. Emerging student leaders can thus be put away without evidence of clear criminal activity, with the effect of preventing the formation of an active, engaged citizenry. At Birzeit University, five of the nine student council members are currently in jail. 80 students from that university are currently in Israeli prisons and 600 students have been arrested in recent years. At the Palestinian Technical University at Tulkarem, all members of the student council were in jail at the time of our visit. There are limited opportunities for continuing education in the prisons, and those that do exist happen in Hebrew.
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Violence and Occupation

It might be hard to imagine how a university could function under the constant threat of closures and with regular onslaughts of violence, but ongoing disruption is a reality for virtually all the institutions in the West Bank. During the Second Intifada (2000-2005), Birzeit University was closed continuously for four years. Faculty and students succeeded in continuing their studies clandestinely during this period, meeting sometimes in private homes and other places off campus. The hotel where we stayed in Ramallah, which had in the past served as a female students’ dormitory for Birzeit, was used for just this purpose during the Intifada. An-Najah National University in Nablus was kept open while its home city was under siege for 6 years, with almost no coming and going. Bethlehem University has been closed 12 times since 1973, once for 3 years. IDF troops have regularly come onto campuses, sometimes using live ammunition that results in injuries and potential fatalities.

During the summer of 2014, Israeli military invaded Birzeit’s campus on multiple occasions on the pretext of searching for three settler teenagers who had been abducted. It later transpired that the military were aware that the youths had already been killed. In Fall 2015, parts of that campus were used to hold detainees. Even at times when closure, invasion and occupation of campuses are not ongoing, access to campus can itself be perilous. We were told at Hebron University of female students who were shot on their way from campus after passing through one of the many checkpoints in their city, which is notorious for the flashpoints that the unusual presence of Israeli settlers within a West Bank city have provoked. No rationale for the shooting was given, other than “security reasons.” Even schoolchildren in Hebron have to be accompanied daily by their teachers as they pass through these checkpoints, for fear of random violence.

Currently, the campus that is most affected by Israeli military presence is PTU at Tulkarem, part of whose lands have actually been expropriated by the wall dividing Israel from the West Bank. In 2015, PTU experienced 85 incursions by the Israeli military, which occupies part of the campus land without university permission. Until recently, some of that land, within 100 meters of campus facilities, was used for a live-fire shooting range. During one of these incursions, in December 2015, 138 unarmed students on that campus suffered bullet wounds and a further 300 were injured by rubber-coated bullets when soldiers pursued some children who had been throwing stones at them. When the children ran into the campus, soldiers in pursuit opened fire on staff and students. In the course of that campus invasion, tear gas was fired through library windows, three greenhouses that were being used for agricultural
experiments were destroyed, and twenty students and staff members were permanently disabled by what were probably hollow-tipped bullets that fragment on impact. During our visit, two individuals showed us the scars left by the wounds they had sustained during this incursion. One was a student who had been playing soccer when he received a text saying his brother had been injured in the incursion. Running to his aid, the student was shot in the thigh with such a bullet. He can no longer play soccer or pursue his studies in sports physiotherapy. The other was a maintenance worker who had been repairing the electrical system in the library and was forced to run out to escape the tear gas. As he ran out of the building he too was shot in the thigh and still visibly had difficulty walking. His ability to work, which involves frequent use of ladders, is severely compromised. We saw the scar from the entry wound and X-rays that clearly showed the bullet fragments that had exploded through his flesh. These are just a few instances of the reports shared with us by faculty, staff and students who were clearly still traumatized by the events that had shaken their campus six months earlier. We will discuss the further impact of these incursions in more detail in the section below on localization.

Barriers to Movement

Time and mobility are central issues for Palestinians at West Bank universities (as indeed for all Palestinians living in the West Bank). Israel directly controls 60% of the Occupied Territories, and has at-will access to the rest. The presence of 547,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem (with an estimated 7500 soldiers permanently provided by the Israeli state to “protect” them) means that there are no areas where Palestinians are free from surveillance, policing or the arbitrary control of their movements. Along with the permanent checkpoints and the apartheid wall (the separation wall or ‘security barrier’) that many Palestinian students and staff must negotiate just to get to school, there are “flying checkpoints” that are imposed without warning and seemingly at random. Ramallah residents cannot enter Jerusalem, some fifteen miles away, without permits, which can take months to apply for and are usually not granted. The same is true, we were told, for residents of Bethlehem, which is even closer to Jerusalem. All Palestinians carry IDs that link them to a home territory where they must do all official business. Enormous time commitments must be made to carry out travel within the West Bank, since there is no predicting when a new checkpoint will be thrown up, nor how long it will take to get through a permanent checkpoint.

We heard endless checkpoint stories: missed classes and exams, routine humiliations, minor acts of violence. One senior administrator was made to remove all of his clothes on a public street, by a young soldier, even though there were women watching on the street. One professor working in a West Bank university, who has an East Jerusalem

“Every day there are a lot of challenges when we travel [to and from work]. What is predictable is the unpredictability of things.”

Faculty member, Bethlehem University, West Bank

11 This is the estimate of Israeli Human Rights organization B’Tselem: http://www.btselem.org/settlements
residence permit, has to cross a checkpoint daily, making a short drive into an ordeal that can last up to two hours. On one occasion, she told us, she was detained for an hour, the trunk of her car searched and her handbag emptied out all over the back seat. Her offence apparently was to have continued a cell-phone conversation with an Israeli friend while waiting in the line and to have been visibly laughing with her. Although—or perhaps because—she was speaking in Hebrew, the border police woman furiously pulled her aside and subjected her to this intensive and harassing search. The professor calmly worked on her grading while she was forced to wait, and when finally permitted to proceed, she asked the policewoman why she had been treated this way. “Because you looked too happy,” was the response.

Not all Palestinians manage to remain quite so sanguine all the time. One senior administrator at a West Bank institution described his humiliation at another checkpoint when he was returning home late in the evening after a long day’s work. Alone at the barrier, he waited fifteen minutes for the green light that permits one to pass through the narrow turnstile for inspection. Finally through, he stood at the window while a very young border policewoman glanced at him and then continued her cell phone call. Only after another fifteen minutes did she finally let him through. “I wanted to smash her into pieces,” our colleague said, and then smiled resignedly.

His reaction was hardly surprising: everywhere we went, we heard tales of such petty humiliation, making the patience of Palestinians in all walks of life more striking than the occasional and much reported outbursts of anger or violence. Patience, or persistence, is a condition of surviving under the circumstances of precarity and petty harassment. Another professor at Bethlehem University, a Palestinian who returned from the diaspora, has a residence permit by virtue of her marriage to a West Bank native. She fears that her permit will be revoked because Israeli authorities claim her husband is not really a resident: he travels too often for his business. At Hebron University, a faculty member showed us his American passport with a stamp in it indicating that he could not travel to Jerusalem; his wife and family live there and he can only see them if they undertake the difficult and sometimes dangerous journey from Jerusalem to Hebron. Even an American passport does not confer immunity from the restrictions on movement that define the daily life of Palestinians everywhere.

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Indeed, we often heard that the system works largely by its unpredictability: a journey that takes 10 minutes one day can take several hours on another. Two students at the Palestinian Technical University in Tulkarem explained that the village in which they lived had been almost entirely sealed off by the surrounding separation wall. A locked gate prevents free movement from their village to campus or to any other part of the West Bank. It is opened only at certain times and is closed early in the evening, which makes it impossible for them to participate in extracurricular events on campus or attend family celebrations. Even relatives cannot enter without special permission. And even this restricted schedule of openings can be modified at any time at the whim of the soldiers who monitor the gate. If the gate is arbitrarily closed for an unexplained “security reason,” the students may find themselves unable to attend classes, or to sit exams, or to return home at night. A student at Bethlehem University described this situation as “structured chaos”: the unpredictability is highly orchestrated and apparently intentional. It is a tactic that produces the most extreme psychological and physical suffering for Palestinians without producing evidence of tangible human rights violations.

Institutional Complicity with the Occupation

Israeli universities’ active, ongoing involvement with the occupation of Palestine has been well-documented. Institutional support includes the development of weapons and technology used to displace and terrorize Palestinian populations and the establishment of Israeli universities in Occupied Territories of the West Bank. During our trip we heard numerous accounts of the less visible kinds of support in the form of institutional complicity and silence that contribute to the disruption of Palestinian’s education. As already noted, no university or university department in Israel has ever formally opposed the occupation or called for its end. One Palestinian activist, an M.A. student at Birzeit, explained that a principal goal of the academic boycott was to target such institutional complicity, given that academic institutions and organizations operate as powerful forces of legitimation of the state on an international stage.

That complicity extends into the conditions of work at Israeli institutions which are, as we noted above, systemically discriminatory against Palestinian faculty and students. Faculty within Israeli institutions described the Kafkaesque process of lodging complaints about discrimination with administrators at their own universities; their complaints are almost always futile. In attempts to attain a minimum standard of dignity in their workplaces, faculty members will sometimes try to schedule meetings or file formal complaints at their institutions.

“The university is a part of the State. It does not exist apart from it.”

Palestinian academic, in Israel
But meetings to discuss harassment by university security personnel of their own students lead nowhere and forms detailing such instances seem to melt into thin air. Similarly, publication support is often provided to Israeli scholars seeking to publish in U.S. journals while assistance to Palestinian scholars, some of whom need the most assistance in translating their work into English, is rarely granted because of the content of their work. Students and faculty consistently witness conferences held on terrorism and policing, which are explicitly anti-Arab, but are unable to get funding for conferences on genocide and occupation. Even the rare conference organized by Israeli academics on those topics cannot be attended by the Palestinians under discussion due to the permit constraints. As a Palestinian student noted, those events risk legitimizing the State by producing the false appearance of a dialogue that cannot actually happen because of legal restrictions.

Conventions for weapons development and military recruitment fairs are hosted on Israeli university campuses as well. During these, Palestinian students and faculty will walk by crowds of colleagues or fellow students actively seeking to participate in the occupation—and sometimes in the destruction of the Palestinians’ hometowns. From students we heard that university administration routinely allows for the disruption of their observation of the Nakba, ignoring or even encouraging Israeli students’ demonstrations against such memorialization. Each of these examples provides insight into the routine disruption that Palestinian students and faculty can expect from their places of education and work.

“History is made and written by academics. They change history because of the long term impact of their work”

Palestinian student, Birzeit University, West Bank

At institutions in the West Bank the role of Israeli universities is less direct. But as one student at Birzeit University said, much of the occupation often works through indirect means. Here the complicity of Israeli universities is crucial and it demonstrates the role that the interior infrastructure of the State of Israel plays in maintaining conditions outside of it. For instance, as guardians of archives and materials that were stolen from Palestinians during and since the Nakba, universities indirectly prevent Palestinian students and faculty from accessing documents necessary for scholarly projects about their own history. For scholars who are not Jerusalem residents, for example, access to the archives of Palestinian history (which are mostly in that city) is not possible; one faculty member was forced to suspend work on the PhD dissertation because of this.
A faculty member at Birzeit University told us that a Palestinian student who is currently completing his dissertation in the U.S. is dependent upon Israeli students to go to Israeli institutions and archives to gather materials for him. Students in the Right 2 Education campaign at Birzeit University recognize the power of these histories and the importance of writing them.

Throughout institutions in the West Bank, we heard that Israeli academic institutions are key to the normalization of the occupation within the international community. Palestinian students and faculty both attested to the bias against them that has been constructed within the U.S. academy. And we were told over and over again by Palestinian teachers that the weight of Israeli faculty’s representations of the conflict when they travel abroad has greatly impacted the lives of Palestinians. Such narratives by Israelis often stand in for Palestinians’ own, since they have such difficulty leaving the country. Faculty also spoke about the shift in Israeli solidarity with Palestinians over recent decades and the distinct limits to what can be achieved by working on occasion with individual Israeli counterparts. The widespread institutional complicity with the State has a far greater effect on Palestinian academics’ lives, according to them.

**Enforced Localization**

The outcome of the system of checkpoints and other limitations to Palestinian teachers’ and students’ mobility, including access to archives and other research resources, is that Palestinian universities are becoming increasingly localized, able to attract only students who live nearby and who therefore do not need to deal with too many travel restrictions. The effects of enforced localization on the West Bank universities were discussed by everyone we met: student populations have become less diverse, and it is no longer possible to attract the best students across the Occupied Territories, including Gaza. Birzeit University now has only 1% of its student body coming from Israel proper, and 1% from Gaza.

Both foreign students who come to West Bank universities to study and visiting professors who come to teach are subject to a three-month visa travel restriction, even though the academic term generally lasts four and a half months (see below). The movement of all goods and persons is controlled by Israeli authorities, both within the West Bank and at its borders. All foreign faculty visits are subject to Israel’s visa restrictions. Palestinians seeking to travel abroad must apply for permits, which are notoriously unpredictable. (We heard one anecdote of a nine-year wait for a US visa, which was then refused.) Curricula and materials are equally affected by restrictions: school curricula are controlled by Israel, and high school teachers have to sign an agreement not to teach “subversive” material. Shipments of books and equipment for classrooms, libraries and laboratories are processed through Israel.

“I met more students from other areas of Palestine during a study abroad program than I have at my own university.”

Graduate student at Hebron University, West Bank
and often delayed or denied. We heard reports of a solar refrigerator being impounded, and an air-quality monitor being destroyed for “security reasons.” A water recycling project was derailed because one essential piece of equipment contained a small amount of a forbidden chemical. The catch-all rationale of “security reasons” permits the all-too arbitrary exclusion of essential equipment, while books in Arabic, which are predominantly printed in Lebanon, simply cannot be imported to the West Bank.

**Studying Abroad**

Travel restrictions present a serious obstacle to students who want to study abroad. Students who earn fellowships abroad are often denied travel permits; the Erasmus scholarship and exchange program—the premier program for students in the European Union who want to study abroad—is on the books at the Birzeit University but students must get the permit in Jerusalem, to which they are often denied access. Internships requiring mobility are disrupted.

**Visiting Faculty and Barriers to Research Collaboration**

Throughout the West Bank we heard about the need for native English speakers to come to the Palestinian universities to strengthen the language programs (education is in English and Arabic), but the visa process makes this almost impossible. The semester lasts for over 4 months but an approved visitor’s visa is only good for three months. Teaching faculty are thus at risk of not completing their courses if they are not able to renew their visas. The absence of foreign faculty and students affects the accreditation process, which depends on such criteria. Access has been made so difficult that most foreigners do not bother pursuing an application. Like other universities worldwide, the West Bank universities are under pressure to enhance their research profiles, but they face uncommon difficulties in this respect. A good deal of foreign funding (e.g. from the EU) depends upon evidence of collaborative work with Jewish Israelis, a process of “normalization” which a large number of scholars and researchers have refused. There is some division of opinion here: Al-Quds University has, as an institution, traditionally condoned such collaboration, while Birzeit (for example) has a policy against it.

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13 The American Anthropological Association report of its Task Force on Engagement with Israel / Palestine offers detailed accounts of restricted or denied access to foreign scholars working on Palestinian materials.
Attitudes to Education

Throughout our visit we were humbled and amazed by the energy and hospitality of our hosts, even as they told us that life under occupation takes a psychological toll. Palestinians of all ages are vividly aware of their history and traditions: family stories, martyrs’ monuments and gravesites, and the sight of confiscated or destroyed property and razed olive groves all loom large in daily life. Students we met possessed an admirable fluency in English, despite the difficulties they face in studying the language with native speakers, and showed an irrepressible faith in the importance of education, even though the objective statistics would seem to encourage despair. Unemployment is at 30% in the West Bank (it is 50% in Gaza). Women make up 78% of the student population at Bethlehem University and 60% at Birzeit, while women compose only 15% of the West Bank workforce. 40% of Bethlehem University students are still unemployed one year after graduation.

Yet we heard relatively little about the appeal of education as a means to enhanced career options. Instead, students expressed a strong commitment to education, and to the right to education, as a civic and ethical principle. They are driven equally by a sense of justice and by an acute sense of the value of an education that has been made so difficult to attain. They regard the universities as important sites for the expression of their ideals. In this respect, they reminded us of many students in the United States who belong to minority groups historically denied access to education. A striking example is the group of Palestinians students at Birzeit University who have founded the movement mentioned above called ‘Right 2 Education’ (R2E), which aims to publicize their situation both at home and abroad. Despite the violent conditions that they face, the students who work with R2E are dedicated to non-violent approaches to combating the occupation, including promoting BDS strategies.

Faculty likewise remain steadfastly committed to the university as a site of study and community, as well as a space that offers some modicum of regularity in lives typically marked by unpredictability. As we learned in Tulkarem and Hebron, a university’s proximity to major checkpoints determines how much safety and regularity it can provide to students and the work of faculty as teachers and mentors is correspondingly more demanding. But to some extent, campuses offer an alternative to the precarity of daily life.

While so many of us in the MLA are rightly concerned about the corporatization of higher education, our Palestinian colleagues are manifestly committed to the traditional ideals of liberal education, ideals that they have not yet been able fully to enjoy: freedom of thought and speech, basic civil rights, and the ability to move unimpeded from place to place in order to conduct and communicate their research or exchange with other scholars.

“We are too busy living our daily lives to pay attention to every aspect of the occupation, its health toll, expectations for poor health here. It is part of the everyday; we focus on relationships with students to make it through. We don’t focus on what happens on the outside when we are here.”

Palestinian faculty member, Bethlehem University, West Bank
Palestinian Perspectives on BDS

Perhaps because they have had so little meaningful support from outside the borders of Palestine, Palestinian faculty and students consider the BDS campaign to be very important.

Before we went to Palestine, we did not know first-hand whether there was wide support within Israel or the West Bank for an academic boycott of Israeli institutions, or whether there was even support for the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement in general. But throughout Palestine we constantly encountered posters promoting the BDS movement. Even complete strangers, randomly encountered on the street, informed us that BDS is a nonviolent route towards a better life for Palestinians.

Although there are a few vocal opponents of BDS among Palestinian academics, most notably Sari Nusseibeh, former President of Al Quds University, we found strong support for the movement among the Palestinian faculty, school teachers, administrators, parents, and both university and high school students whom we met in Israel and the West Bank. For many Palestinians in the college and university systems, BDS evidently represents the best hope for gaining international support that they can conceive, even though they themselves are not in a position to participate in the BDS movement except by not cooperating with Israeli institutions and refusing to purchase Israeli goods. The effective implementation of BDS relies on the commitment of people outside Palestine.

The reasons for Palestinian commitment to BDS are not hard to understand. It is difficult to convey the sense of futility and desperation expressed by almost everyone we met with in Palestine. For Palestinians, the dire conditions we describe above are their normality and they feel they have no reason to expect that those conditions will change. Their sense that every initiative they take to improve their lives is blocked, either by the occupation or by international complicity with it, explains the enthusiasm and hope that the call for an academic boycott within the larger BDS context has inspired and the virtually unanimous support our interlocutors expressed for it.

Because of the extremity of Palestinians’ conditions, BDS, with its nonviolent and international strategy, represents for them a revitalizing political possibility. Some even described BDS as the only option left for them on a bleak, post-Oslo Accord landscape where any material improvement of their situation seems unimaginable.
Among the people of different ages and academic ranks with whom we talked, BDS represents a ray of hope for increasing the world’s awareness of Palestinians’ oppression. Some view BDS positively as displacing the case for armed struggle, while others (a small minority of those with whom we spoke) see the two as complementary, as they were in South Africa before the end of apartheid in 1994. But almost everyone we talked to viewed the BDS platform as an important vehicle for expressing the views of many in Palestinian civil society. And most of those with whom we spoke gauged the importance of BDS in relation to the fact that it has generated so much opposition from the Israeli government. Contesting BDS is now part of a ministerial portfolio: Minister of Public Security, Strategic Affairs and Minister of Information Gilad Erdan proudly announced his ministry’s direct involvement in opposing last November’s AAA resolution.

The campaign to suppress BDS activism has certainly intensified over the past year. A sinister phrase has been coined to describe state policy against BDS activists, “targeted civil elimination,” which riffs on the euphemism generally used for the extra-judicial assassination of Palestinian militants, “targeted elimination.” In Haifa, we met with Omar Barghouti, one of the founders of BDS, who has now been denied the right to travel on account of his advocacy for BDS and who feels threatened by Erdan’s public use of this phrase. He no longer returns to his home alone, for fear of an assault legitimated by this kind of language. His situation may be exacerbated by his public prominence as an internationally recognized BDS advocate, but the sense that support for BDS was increasingly meeting with punitive sanctions was echoed by many of those we met within Israel, as one left-wing Israeli interlocutor in Jerusalem, cited below, exemplified.

Of course, there is more and more evidence here in the US of a similarly punitive response to BDS activities. Former U.S. Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton publicly announced her opposition to the BDS movement during her campaign, while more recently Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York State, signed an executive order that would sanction entities in the state that had implemented BDS.

In Fall 2016, Jerry Brown, Governor of California, likewise signed Assembly Bill 2844, which requires state contractors to certify that they are not violating existing “anti-discrimination laws” by boycotting Israel. Neither measure is likely to pass legal scrutiny, but they are an index of the repressive climate that also affects universities: as witness the President of the University of California’s unusually preemptive letter, signed by all ten UC Chancellors, “advising” their anthropology faculty not to vote in favor of the AAA boycott resolution. More broadly, websites like the anonymous Canary Mission seek to intimidate students and faculty by publishing their names and personal details while accusing them of anti-Semitism and support for terrorism. In Canada, a country strongly represented in the MLA, the governing Liberals in February 2016
overwhelmingly approved a Conservative motion condemning Canadians who promote the BDS movement. Freedom of speech is thus simultaneously under threat in Israel, in the Occupied Territories, and in other countries, including the United States and Canada.

We turn now to a more detailed discussions of views on the academic boycott in our meetings both in Israel and in the West Bank.

**The Israeli Left, BDS and Academic Boycott**

In our meetings with Palestinian and Jewish academics in Israel, we found a range of opinions about academic boycott, sometimes but not always divided along ethnic lines. During our meeting in East Jerusalem with a mixed group of Palestinian and Jewish Israeli professors and students, one Jewish Israeli professor argued strongly that academic boycott is a misguided policy, since in his view “universities are inherently liberal institutions” where ideas are freely exchanged and should thus be ring-fenced from practical politics. Another held the view that proper criticism of the Israeli state should take the form of vocal dissent but not boycott. Another argued for the need to boycott settlement products only, or companies directly involved in the military occupation or its attendant security apparatus. But in the same room there were Palestinians who had been to jail for their political activism: one three times, one twice. They pointed out the absolute integration of the Israeli universities with the security administration; they also noted that research at Israeli universities enhances the military technologies used in the occupation and that the Hebrew University, like Tel Aviv University and other institutions, was built on a former Palestinian village.

Some participants in this conversation found ample reason to boycott Israeli academic institutions for their complicity with the work of the occupation and their failure to resist it. As one young Jewish Israeli student, an activist working with a conscientious objectors’ support group, responded: “Only their complicity with and silence about the occupation gives the universities the right to be liberal.” Those who do want to resist and show their support for BDS now fear reprisals from the government of Israel, which has equated BDS with terrorism. One young Jewish Israeli faculty member, who identified himself as politically progressive and sympathetic to Palestinian rights, told us privately that were he to support BDS,
he would be afraid to make it public because he would lose his job. According to him, Israel has until recently been a democracy for Jews, if never fully so for Palestinians. That is changing as freedom of speech for Jews who support BDS is under serious legal and administrative threat. With the settler movement now dominant in national politics, there is talk of removing funding from any university that has faculty who support BDS.

At our meeting in Tel Aviv with Israeli academics—eight members of a recently formed group called “Academia for Equality”—we also heard a range of opinions about BDS, although no one in this group voiced the opinion that BDS threatens academic freedom or mounted a defense of the university as an oasis of liberal dissent—arguments that are often voiced by the liberal Zionist left in the U.S. and that we heard expressed at the Jerusalem meeting. Academia for Equality as an organization does not take an official position on the academic boycott, on both pragmatic and political grounds.

Within the group there are some who openly support the boycott, others who cannot openly support it because of job precarity, and some who object to it on either principled or strategic grounds even though they are unequivocally opposed to the current regime. In support of the boycott, one faculty member mentioned the fact that it was called for “by the overwhelming majority of Palestinian academics and the Palestinian population as a whole”; opposing the boycott, others said that it contributes to the diminishing power of the Israeli left and reinforces the paralyzing power of repression.

Despite this (sometimes quite conflicted) range of attitudes, the members with whom we met were unanimous in their support for the legitimacy of boycott as a tactic. Indeed, one of the most vocal opponents of the boycott at the meeting wrote to us recently: “Notwithstanding my reticence regarding the BDS, I still hope the MLA will adopt an unequivocal position in support of the Palestinian struggle, and if the BDS is the only way right now to do so, then so be it.”

Another member of the group said, “Let’s think pragmatically: I don’t see any other option right now. BDS is coming from the outside. The situation is becoming visible to the outside. For the first time things are being stated out loud; never before has such polarization been visible. The fact that there are explicit condemnations by university presidents, by government ministries, by the governor of New York—all this means that everything is now on the table. This is a critical moment.”

**What Palestinian Students and Faculty We Met Think About the Academic Boycott**

While the academic boycott is only one strand of the larger BDS movement, which is a multi-pronged campaign that also targets the Israeli economy and seeks to move governments to impose international sanctions, the Palestinian students and faculty we met unanimously attested to the strategic importance...
both of BDS and of academic boycott. Why do they do so? One person told us succinctly: “without freedom there can be no academic freedom.” Beyond addressing the practical complicity of Israeli institutions, they spoke often of the crucial role that Israeli universities play in securing legitimacy for the occupation in an international context. Palestinian academics understand universities as inseparable from the State of Israel, not only because they actively contribute research that supports the occupation but also because they give the appearance of a liberal, democratic society that is not a reality for Palestinians. The boycott of those institutions accordingly stands as a major means to resisting the normalization of what is, for Palestinians, an apartheid state committed to their exclusion and dispossession.

Understandably, Palestinian academics routinely told us that their Israeli counterparts should join them in calling for a boycott against their own institutions, rather than continuing to call on Palestinians to engage in the always asymmetrical charade of dialogue whose futility is increasingly apparent. BDS is not an attempt to isolate those Israeli academics who support Palestinians, we were told. Palestinians will continue to do what they always have under the occupation, building relationships with allies despite extreme barriers.

Implications of our Findings for MLA Members
Considering a Vote on Whether or Not the MLA Should Support BDS

A broad spectrum of our interlocutors felt that an academic boycott has a strategically significant part to play in the achievement of Palestinian rights and equality with Jewish Israelis. In contrast to claims that BDS offers nothing to Palestinians, we were reminded throughout our trip that the support U.S. academic organizations can offer is taken to be morally, materially and politically significant--and the longstanding absence of such support is keenly felt as well. The MLA in particular is held by Palestinians in very high regard, along with other academic organizations that have passed or are considering resolutions supporting an academic boycott. To date, most American academics have passively or actively denied equitable regard to their Palestinian colleagues by their silence on the impact of Israel’s occupation and discrimination. One key outcome of the academic boycott, as we were told, is that it would limit the de facto complicity of U.S. academic organizations with the occupation by withholding the prestige their recognition confers.

“We have to boycott and find ways to still support those professors who support Palestine.”
Palestinian academic, in Israel
upon Israeli institutions. Those institutions are entirely dependent upon that recognition for their success and integration in the global academic community. But such recognition is systematically and structurally denied to Palestinian institutions. They believe that in granting Palestinian institutions the same recognition that Israeli ones receive, one effect of the movement to boycott might be to improve access to and the quality of the Palestinian higher education system over the long term.

Encouraging academic organizations like the MLA to withdraw their one-sided support for Israeli institutions is part of a broader attempt to bring pressure to bear on the Israeli State to end both its occupation and the current apartheid-like policies that create separate and unequal conditions for Palestinians within Israel. Everyone we spoke to felt that, in the current moment, Israel feels no need to take steps that might lead to the recognition of the most basic Palestinian rights, let alone to the implementation of a just and equitable solution. To date, no Western government, least of all the United States, has proven willing to apply pressure on Israel to abide by the norms of international law and human rights, and Palestinians are increasingly reliant on civil society organizations globally to supply that pressure, both on Israel and on their own politicians.

An academic boycott would acknowledge that Palestinians are currently denied equal conditions of access, safety and quality of education. Perhaps most pertinent to the MLA’s membership, given our collective commitment to the furthering of academic freedom, an academic boycott directly addresses Israel’s ongoing denial of academic freedom to Palestinian students and faculty. Under current conditions only Israeli academics have the ability, in practice, to benefit from the open exchange of ideas protected by the principle of academic freedom.

From the perspective of one student we spoke to, any policy that defends academic freedom as it currently exists in Israel and Palestine maintains a de facto denial of it to Palestinians. But no Israeli university or department has taken a stand against the occupation, or even against its impact on higher education, and neither the State Department nor any EU organization has opposed the travel restrictions placed upon West Bank, Gazan, and Israeli Palestinians. Unequal rights of academic freedom condition what is possible for academics, both Palestinian and Israeli, to achieve. For those Palestinian academics we met with, and for some Jewish Israelis as well, the academic boycott recognizes that disparity and rightfully sanctions Israeli universities for their role in exacerbating it.

“Right now the imbalance is too strong and the leadership in Israel isn’t producing options. They don’t even believe in the two-state solution to end occupation. It’s just an apartheid situation.”

Palestinian academic, in Israel

“When we talk about academic freedom, we are always doing that at the expense of those who do not have it.”

Palestinian student, West Bank
Thanks
We would like to thank our readers in the MLA for their attention to this document. And we would also like to thank all of those who made this report possible by speaking to us in Israel and the West Bank. We would like to thank our hosts at all of the institutions we visited in Israel and the West Bank for the extraordinarily generous hospitality that they extended to us, despite the constraints that affect every dimension of Palestinian private and institutional life and despite the inconvenience of our visit falling during the month of Ramadan. In order to preserve the safety of our hosts and interlocutors, who mostly asked that their names not be published or even their voices recorded for fear of reprisal, we cannot name the many people who welcomed us so generously. Our heartfelt gratitude is not thereby diminished.

Respectfully submitted,

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