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A Palestinian University Builds Partnerships With Israeli Institutions

With Hamas about to take power, Al-Quds U. faces criticism that it undermines the cause of freedom

By KATHERINE ZOEPPF

Ramallah, West Bank

On a cold winter morning, Khuloud Khayyat Dajani, a Palestinian, stands in the freezing rain, juggling two bags of books, a stack of plastic folders, and an umbrella. The dean of public health at Al-Quds University, she is part of a long line of people attempting to pass through Kalandia, one of Israel's largest military checkpoints in the West Bank.

Ahead of her lies a maze of steel fences and crude gravel paths. The mud is ankle-deep in places, and the surrounding walls are topped with great whorls of barbed wire. Fortified guard boxes and surveillance towers are everywhere.

The checkpoint is part of Dr. Dajani's daily commute, a six-mile gantlet between her home in East Jerusalem and the Palestinian university where she teaches.

In a taxi, on the other side, Dr. Dajani takes a packet of moist towelettes out of her purse and meticulously wipes the spattered mud from her shoes, skirt, and coat.

"It's always like this at the checkpoints," she says. "But this was really an easy day. Sometimes you have materials for your lecture — transparencies and diskettes — and the soldiers break them. You tell them that it's for a lecture, but it doesn't matter. The Israelis say that this is all for the sake of security."

Dr. Dajani runs down the litany of hardships Palestinian academics must endure: hours that could have been spent doing research instead wasted in lines at checkpoints; a ban on using Ben Gurion Airport, Israel's largest, to travel to conferences abroad; meetings and classes canceled at the last minute because an essential participant was denied permission to travel by the Israeli authorities.

Despite these daily humiliations, Dr. Dajani is eager to work with Israeli academics. In fact, the lecture that she is on her way to Ramallah to deliver is for students taking part in a master's-degree program in social and humanitarian affairs that is run jointly by Al-Quds, a consortium of Israeli universities, and the University of Rome La Sapienza.

Al-Quds (pronounced al-koods) is unique in this regard: It is the only one of 10 Palestinian universities that does not boycott all interactions with Israeli universities. Yet that very cooperation has put Al-Quds in a

precarious position. Even as it struggles to pay salaries and keep its campuses running, the university has come under harsh attack here for its ties to Israel. Ordinary citizens, as well as some Palestinian academics, have even accused Al-Quds of treason.

As a new Hamas-led Palestinian government takes power this month or in early April, such criticisms may increase.

Unexpected Holidays

Al-Quds's main campus is in Abu Dis, which local Palestinians often refer to as the first village on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho but which is technically within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries. A collection of pale concrete buildings clustered behind a campus mosque, Al-Quds's most notable landmark is a thick concrete wall, 26 feet high, that looms near the campus — part of the "antiterrorism fence" that Israel built in 2002 to separate itself from the Palestinian-controlled territories.

A small shop near the entrance sells school supplies, and ink sketches of the Jerusalem skyline decorate the walls of the university. Yet, on a recent visit, the hallways are nearly empty. Palestinian unemployment levels have skyrocketed in recent years, and many students' families cannot afford to pay tuition. As a result, Al-Quds has been unable to pay salaries to its faculty and staff members for more than six months and a general strike is under way. All but a handful of classes, such as Ms. Dajani's, have been canceled until further notice.

Samia al-Khatib, a chemistry professor, says that such disturbances are a common feature of life at Palestinian universities.

"Every year it's like this," Ms. al-Khatib says. "Unexpected holidays and extended breaks that we can't plan for. It's because of the situation. Most of the professors have extra jobs, teaching in schools or working in publishing. You need it to survive."

Al-Quds, which enrolls about 6,000 students on its three main campuses — in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Abu Dis — was founded through the merger of four smaller colleges in 1984. It is one of the oldest of 24 Palestinian universities and "university colleges," an official category that includes nursing schools and technical-training institutes. "Al-Quds" is the Arabic word for Jerusalem, and Al-Quds administrators say the university wants to be a Palestinian Harvard, a university that Palestinian students of all backgrounds might aspire to attend.

Al-Quds's reputation in the fields of medicine, dentistry, and the sciences is particularly strong; administrators say that of the approximately 16,000 Palestinian students who take the general secondary certificate exam at the end of their high-school years, the majority of the top 150 scorers will enter Al-Quds in one of the health sciences.

Al-Quds's focus on international cooperation is the vision of Sari Nusseibeh, the university's president. Mr. Nusseibeh, a philosophy professor, oversaw the establishment of a long-term cooperative agreement with Brandeis University, and the founding of the Issam Sartawi Center for the Advancement of Peace and Democracy, at Al-Quds, in 1998. The Sartawi Center serves as an umbrella organization for dozens of joint programs and scientific-cooperation projects with Israeli and international universities. Academics from any Palestinian university are free to use its resources and participate in its programs.

"We have always promoted cooperation with Israeli academics because we feel that scholars and scientists should always be talking to each other," says Hasan Dweik, an associate professor of polymer science and acting president of Al-Quds when Mr. Nusseibeh is traveling.

Al-Quds's projects with Israeli universities tend to be trilateral arrangements, often brokered by another international partner, and financed by international nongovernmental organizations and research institutes.

Most projects are scientific and deal with such topics as child nutrition, parasitic diseases, and telecardiology. Many of the projects are designed with a view toward assisting with Al-Quds's long-term development needs, says Mr. Dweik. Grants for cooperative projects have been used to build laboratories and research centers at the university and to hire new faculty members, he says.

Focus on Cooperation

Although professors from other Palestinian universities take part in these collaborative research projects, Al-Quds's commitment to working with Israeli universities has been widely criticized here. Many academics who might otherwise support cooperation with Israelis believe that, since the beginning of the second intifada in September 2000, the timing for such projects is wrong, Mr. Dweik says.

"These people say, look, you have checkpoints, you have the killing of students, you have all the difficulties of getting from one place to another," he says. "They say, why don't we just postpone all of this until peace is established? But at Al-Quds, we feel that we need to focus on cooperation, no matter what else is going on."

Munther S. Dajani, a professor of political science at the university who also directs the Sartawi Center, says that Al-Quds academics are sometimes accused of treason for flouting the strict boycott of Israeli academics that all other Palestinian universities observe. But when confronted by critics, he points to the concrete benefits that projects with Israeli universities have brought about.

"For example, look at our new Child Institute, a research and community center for child health," says Mr. Dajani, who is Dr. Dajani's husband. "Some of the equipment there costs \$200,000. The only way that we can afford this is through joint programs. You have to apply for an international donor for everything, and they're much more interested in funding joint projects."

Despite these gleaming new facilities, Al-Quds professors say that the university suffers from the same financial and logistical problems that dog other Palestinian universities and that, in the current political climate, some of their colleagues question the viability of continuing to work with the Israelis.

The antiterrorism fence is not the only barrier between Israeli and Palestinian universities. When the master's degree program that Al-Quds runs in cooperation with the University of Rome La Sapienza and Israeli universities organized a special session in East Jerusalem so that the Israeli and Palestinian students, who attend their classes separately, could meet each other, Israeli authorities did not permit 80 percent of the Palestinian students to come to Jerusalem.

Students seem to steer clear of such controversies, however. Asked by a visitor why they enrolled at Al-Quds, many talk about their dedication to their field of study or their desire to travel. When pressed to explain their feelings about the university's relationships with Israeli universities, they merely smile and politely duck the question.

"As far as meeting Israeli students goes, we haven't done that yet," says Maureen Marroum, a student in the joint master's program. "We're completely segregated for all our classes."

A Bad Reputation

Naim Abu Hommos, the Palestinian Authority's education minister, will soon be leaving his position when the new Hamas-led Palestinian government takes power. After the Oslo accords 11 years ago, Mr. Abu Hommos was asked by Yasir Arafat to found the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

Now, sitting in an airy conference room in a ministry building constructed with grant money from the Norwegian government, he seems nostalgic as he talks about leaving the institution that he had such a large role in building.

"Founding the ministry, we worked day and night," Mr. Abu Hommos recalls. "We looked around the world for models of how to run an education ministry. We've also founded a council for research, and an independent accreditation body. I am proud to be leaving because I believe that when you set a good system into place, it will live on after you. "

Some academics here believe that Palestinian universities have actually benefited from international attention on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Donations from Western organizations interested in Palestinian causes have helped finance campus facilities and provided contacts with the outside world, says Ziad Abdeen, director of Al-Quds's Nutrition and Health Research Institute.

Al-Quds administrators, and their Israeli partners, say their projects will very likely be unaffected by the success of Hamas in the recent Palestinian elections.

"Actually, I think that many people will be surprised at how things will continue despite the ascendancy of Hamas," says Eyal Ben-Ari, director of the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. "They will moderate, I think and hope."

Many Al-Quds professors take pride in how much the university has developed since the Oslo accords. "Prior to 1995 we used to feel isolated and inferior," says Mr. Abdeen. "But since 1995 we have become much better. We can compete locally, regionally, and internationally. And we have ties with every single Israeli academic institution."

But Mr. Abu Hommos looks pained when asked about Al-Quds University's cooperation with Israeli universities. He notes the problems that Palestinian academics have in obtaining permission from the Israeli authorities even to meet with their colleagues at other Palestinian universities.

"Why can't a professor at Bethlehem University go to Birzeit University?" he asks, referring to two of the largest Palestinian universities. "And now you're talking of bringing them to the Israeli universities?"

He fears that professors at Al-Quds are undermining the credibility of all Palestinian academics by consorting with the very people who are making their lives so difficult. "We academics are people carrying the flag of peace, so don't show us up to the people as traitors," he says.

Many of Mr. Hommos's employees must sleep in their offices each night because checkpoints make it next to impossible to get from the ministry building in Ramallah to their nearby homes. (A large heap of blankets

and paisley-patterned mattresses tucked in a stairwell attests to that.) Over the past several years, Palestinian universities have been frequently shelled and vandalized, and even forcibly closed, by Israeli forces.

"We must put first things first," Mr. Abu Hommos continues. "Our security and our intellectual freedom must be first respected by the Israelis."

Most members of the Palestinian establishment share his position. But Dr. Abdeen, director of Al-Quds's Nutrition and Health Research Institute, begs to differ.

"It's high time that we started to look at Israel as a neighbor," Dr. Abdeen says. "It's such a small piece of land that we both live in. We can either stand face to face, or back to back."

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