

Reflections after a visit in Palestine in January 2007

In January I visited Palestine, where the Palestine Academy for Science and Technology organized a meeting with colleagues from the Palestine universities to discuss "How can the international academic community help the Palestinians". The meeting was held in the Academy's building in Ramallah on January 8. I am very grateful to the Palestine Academy for arranging this meeting.

The following scholars and scientists participated:

Sari Nusseibeh, Professor of Philosophy, President, Al-Quds University (Also UNESCO Chair of "Freedom of Expression," Co-Chairman, Israeli-Palestinian Science Organization (IPSO), Member: The Palestinian National Council, Member of the Steering Committee of the Palestinian Negotiating Team (1991-1993) and PLO Commissioner for Jerusalem Affairs (2002).)

Munther S. Dajani, University Professor of Political Science, Dean, Faculty of Arts, and Director, Issam Sartawi Center for Democracy Peace Studies, Al Quds University (Former Director General, Ministry of Economy and Trade)

Radwan Barakat, Professor of Plant Production and Protection, Dean, College of Graduate Studies and Academic Research, Hebron University. (See the interview with him in the last section of the attachment from *Nature*.)

From the Palestine Academy for Science and Technology:

Dr. Imad Khatib, Secretary General of the Academy and Director, Renewable Energy and Environment Research Unit - Palestinian Polytechnic University
and Dr. Ayman Al Haj Daoud, Director of the Academy's Publication and R&D Affairs Division

In addition, from The Representative Office of Norway to the Palestinian Authority two officials participated: Grete Løchen, Deputy Representative and Signe Guro Gilen, Councillor,

Two obstacles for Palestine education and research

The situation in Palestine is deteriorating rapidly. When I first visited Palestine in 1964, there was much injustice and oppression, but there was still hope. Now, 33 years later, few Palestinians express any hope.

I shall here concentrate on the educational system. Not only are the universities and the research institutions being destroyed, but the educational system at all levels. Several factors contribute to this:

First, the **economic pressure** put on Palestine by countries that try to overthrow the results of democratic elections. Thus, Israel is withholding \$500 million in Palestinian tax revenue to which the Palestinians are legally entitled, and some other countries withhold aid. The government is not able to pay salaries. I met persons working in governmental offices who have not received a salary since September. Much of the internal strife and unrest in Palestine now is due to the problems that arise from this economic pressure. This is clearly the aim; these other countries want new elections and hope they will give different results. However, an opinion poll conducted by the Norwegian research institute FAFO in the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza between 25 November and 5 December 2006, showed that a majority of Palestinians do not want new elections. The suggestion of new elections received the support of one in five (21%) of those asked. This shows that even most of those who voted for Fatah, do not want a new election, at least not an election imposed upon them from the outside.

<http://www.fafo.no/ais/middeast/opt/opinionpolls/index.htm>

Palestine is totally dependent upon Israel for its import and export. Israel does not permit Palestine to build or use any harbor on the Gaza strip. Palestine's only airport has been destroyed, and even the transport between the two parts of Palestine is controlled by Israel. Israel buys agricultural products from Palestine for only a fraction of the price it gets when it exports corresponding products.

However, Palestine is a small country, and the economic problems can be solved. The countries that voted for the UN resolution that established the State of Israel in 1947 have a responsibility for implementing the later UN resolutions relating to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Until this happens they have an obligation to give Palestine the aid it needs.

The main problem for Palestine education on all levels is, however, the **settlements and the wall and the resulting check points**. The settlements, the roads to and from them, and the wall, require Palestinians to cross check points several times a day, on their way to work, to their fields, to water, to hospitals – and on their way to school. The attached article, “The Geography of Occupation: Education in Conflict,” by Basem L. Ra’ad, Professor of English and World Civilizations at Al-Quds University, gives an impression of the problems. (From Al-Quds University’s web page: <http://www.alquds.edu/press/articles/geography.php>) These problems have received less attention than they deserve, and they are important for what I will propose. Even many Israelis seem not to be aware of the hardship their government imposes on their neighbors.

An old saying states that if you want to destroy the future of a country, then destroy its educational institutions. For this reason it is crucial that pressure be brought on Israel to remove these obstacles to free movement within Palestine.

Proposals

At the meeting we discussed a number of ways in which the international academic community can help the Palestinians.

Most obvious are the standard areas of international cooperation:

1. **Cooperation** between researchers in joint seminars and joint research projects.
- 2 **Exchange** of students, faculty and researchers.

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Research Council of Norway and the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education have several programs to support collaboration within higher education and research between Norway and various other countries and regions, including Palestine. For information about these, see <http://fm.siu.no/embassy/>

The following are additional initiatives that it would be natural for Norway to take and where a small effort can make a big difference:

3. The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters hosts a large number of **scientific symposia**, some of them organized by the Academy, others by other institutions. A special effort could be made to invite to these symposia Palestinian researchers with high competence in the field of the symposium.
4. There has long been cooperation between the Nordic countries in the form of yearly meetings between their **academies and learned societies**. There is also a cooperation program between the Nordic and Baltic academies. The Academy also has cooperation agreements with the academies in Poland, Hungary and France. Palestine is in a very difficult situation, and it would be desirable to extend the cooperation to include Palestine.

These two proposals will be taken up by a committee that the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters appointed in December to evaluate the Academy's international role.

5. Palestinian students should be enabled to participate in the many short, intensive **research courses** that are arranged in many fields. An example would be the ethics courses that have been offered by the Norwegian Research Council's Ethics Program. This program was established in 1991 as a ten year program which is now being continued by the various universities. This program offers **courses** in ethics taught by prominent contributors to the various fields of ethics. The courses are concentrated in one week, with 20-24 lectures. Participants prepare for the lectures by reading a literature packet that they receive some months before the lectures begin, and they write an essay for the course that is commented upon by the lecturer, rewritten by the participant and then commented upon again by the lecturer. Students from other Nordic countries have participated, supported by NorFa, now NordForsk, the Nordic Research Board, while the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has supported the participation of students from the Baltic countries. Since the lecture part of the courses is concentrated in one week, the living costs, which are the main expense, are low, and it would be good if Palestinian participants could be supported on a par with the Nordic and Baltic students.

6. At the meeting in Ramallah, we also discussed the brain drain connected with sending students to Ph.D. programs abroad. My view is that good students should be encouraged to get into the best programs they can get into. This will give them a broad and thorough education, with teaching and

feedback by the foremost researchers within the various disciplines of their subject. They will also come back with good international contacts to their teachers and to fellow students. The problem is to get them back. The first months after their Ph.D. are crucial. The best of them are likely to be offered jobs at good research universities. My recommendation is to place emphasis on **postdocs**, for two or more years, to provide a bridge between the Ph.D. and a regular position. Many of the faculty members of the Palestinian universities have received their education in good Ph.D. programs abroad and also taught abroad before returning to Palestine. It is to be hoped that the young generation of Palestinian students will follow their example and be willing to sacrifice high salaries and good laboratories in order to build up their country.

7. University teaching and research has to build on good elementary schools and high schools, and here the situation in Palestine is catastrophic, (see Basem L. Ra'ad's article referred to above). Good schools cost a lot in money and personnel. One little thing Norway could and should do, is to build up close ties between Norwegian schools and Palestinian schools, a system of **friendship schools**, where not only the individual schools establish contacts, but where students in Norwegian schools correspond with students in Palestinian schools. Such ties will be of particular importance in the present situation where many Palestinians, old and young, experience that their situation is getting more and more hopeless and feel that they are not only betrayed, but also forgotten by the rest of the world.

Is there hope?

As Jimmy Carter points out in *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*, the fate of Palestine is in the hands of Israel. Peace will come to Israel and the Middle East only when the Israeli government is willing to comply with international law – and honor its previous commitments – by accepting its legal borders. Recent polls show that 60 % of the Israelis understand this, but this is of little help unless they want it, and elect leaders who want it.

Fortunately, very many Israelis are working towards such a solution. I also stayed in Israel, and I there visited the headquarter of **B'Tselem** - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories <http://www.btselem.org/English/>. This organization was established in 1989 by a group of prominent academics, attorneys, journalists, and Knesset members. Here Jessica Montell and her many helpers endeavor to “document and educate the Israeli public and policymakers about human rights violations in the Occupied Territories, combat the phenomenon of denial prevalent among the Israeli public, and help create a human rights culture in Israel.” (B'Tselem in Hebrew means "in the image of," alluding to Genesis 1:27).

The hope for the Palestinians will be Israelis like those who created B'Tselem and work there. Fortunately, more and more Israelis and Jews all over the world see that they can no longer keep quiet. Today, February 5, 2007, 130 prominent British Jews declared independence from the country's Jewish establishment, arguing that it puts support for Israel above the human rights of Palestinians <http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,,2005881,00.html>. To speak out requires some courage, one will immediately be labeled an anti-Semite, as has happened to Thomas Friedman, the excellent New York Times columnist, and many, many others. The world needs many more like them. When the government of a country commits atrocities, then it is important that everybody, and especially the citizens of that country and all who are associated with it, show civil courage and speak out against what is going on.