

A New Paradigm for Palestinian-Israeli Consensus Building through Academic Freedom and Academic Cooperation

Three preliminary workshops were conducted on the subject of academic freedom and cooperation. The first at the Hebrew University (28. 4), it was chaired by Prof. Moshe Maoz. The second at the University of Haifa (30.4), it was chaired by Prof. Michael Gross. The third at Tel Aviv University (26.5) chaired by Dr. Ephraim Lavie, opening words by Prof. Mottie Tamarkin and Prof. Daniel Bar-Tal. Discussants in the meetings were Prof. Edward Kaufman (University of Maryland) and Walid Salem (Al Quds University). Zoe Levornik and Scott Ratner, project associates

Participants

Participants at the meetings included representatives from a broad range of academic fields such as sociology and anthropology, political science, international relations, economy, education, Middle East studies, women and gender studies, Peace studies, law, and earth science. The meeting at the Hebrew University included 11 participants. There were 17 participants at the meeting at the University of Haifa (which also included a number of graduate students). At the meeting at Tel Aviv University there were 18 participants.

Introduction

The purpose of the workshops was to conduct a preliminary brain-storming session between academics on the Israeli side in order to discuss the challenges to academic freedom and cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian universities, as well as possible solutions.

Since Oslo we see a significant decline in academic cooperation and joint projects between Israeli and Palestinian researchers (the few that are being done are done in secret for fear of opposition). Even cooperation mediated through a third party is rare since many are reluctant to take part in such projects because of the growing pressure from the BDS movement.

According to Prof. Kaufman academic freedom is not only freedom of speech or freedom of expression, it is also the freedom to cooperate with whoever we want as researchers without discrimination or fear. Moreover, universities have an ethical commitment to academic freedom. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict presents a difficult situation, how can we have cooperation in an asymmetrical situation, a situation of ethnic/political/national conflict, when there is an occupier and an occupied side, which means that the two sides are not on equal standing. What is the impact of

occupation on cooperation? Prof. Kaufman argues that what is needed is a code of ethics that will provide guidelines for cooperation in an asymmetrical situation.

One of the problems recognized by Prof. Kaufman is that of 'insularity.' While students and members of academia have always been known for standing at the forefront of the struggle for human rights and democracy in their own countries, they do not seem to be as active when it comes to fighting for human rights and peace across the divide when there is a situation of conflict. Moreover, there seems to be a general lack of social responsibility and social activism among academics these days, one's career seems to be at the top of the priority list. However, the problem of academic boycott cannot be ignored because as movements like the BDS grow more powerful it will only become worse and people's careers will be affected. More importantly, members of academia have a social responsibility, they must not only acknowledge but also to 'act upon knowledge.'

The second problem that Prof. Kaufman recognizes is that of a lack of understanding of the difference between cooperation when both sides are equal and cooperation in an asymmetrical situation such as the situation between the Israelis and the Palestinians. In a situation of occupation when one side has complete freedom but the other does not a much greater commitment is required than simply the willingness to cooperate.

On the Palestinian side Walid Salem (and the CDCD) recognizes several important problems.

What are the criteria for defining and safeguarding academic criteria in Israel and Palestine?

Do models for the western education tradition apply to our situation in light of our geographic location as well as circumstances of occupation?

When it comes to the BDS and particularly the Palestinian Academic Campaign for the Boycott of Israel, Palestinians are typically accused of transgressing a number of essential principles of academic freedom, including failing to differentiate between the Israeli left and right, or those who support Palestinian rights vs. those that do not, and that they are letting their emotions dictate their political strategies by boycotting an entire society rather than merely certain individuals in that society or by refusing to use dialogue to create peaceful relations .

It is essential to take into account the boycott is a RESPONSE to occupation and the general deterioration of the status of human and educational rights of the Palestinians. Boycott should therefore not be seen a priori as the problem but rather a response to it, and we (the academic community) should be focusing instead on the conditions that have created and led to the persistence of the problem of occupation .

Walid Salem notes that he and the CDCD do NOT adhere to this opinion, but it is important that Israeli audiences understand the boycott movement in its appropriate context as well as why the campaign has attracted such a wide following in the mainstream Palestinian academic community.

Moreover, there is a very prevalent feeling in Palestinian academia that believes that their Israeli counterparts look upon them as academically inferior and that they have not made enough strides to reach across the border and work with them. This too has contributed to Palestinian frustration with Israeli academia and led many to believe that they are not doing enough to remedy the injustices of occupation, and particularly the violation of Palestinian academic rights. This in turn has led to increased Palestinian support for the academic boycott of Israeli institutions.

Even pro-Palestinian Israeli academia has been too selective on the issues that they support, and they almost invariably do it within a Zionist framework that treats Palestinians as a threat rather than a community with distinct rights. These Israeli academics have not sought to create symmetry with their Palestinian counterparts but rather adopted the prevailing framework of “security” and Israeli patriotism, which only reinforces their unwillingness to view Palestinian academia as equals. They have therefore refrained from reaching out across the border of speaking up on behalf of those living under occupation.

A good example of this is the “right of return,” an issue that few Israeli academics have conducted constructive dialogue on because of its political sensitivity and the fears it arouses among Israeli academics of being black listed .

Israelis cannot ask Palestinians to cease resisting; they cannot demand that Palestinians stop using violence while simultaneously claiming that the BDS, a non-violent movement par-excellence, is illegitimate. BDS is dedicated to non-violent and civic resistance, and it should be recognized by Israeli society as a legitimate means of action.

Because of the occupation and the associated problems that it creates in Palestinian society, academic freedom is not given priority. At times the occupation has helped bring Israelis and Palestinians together, such as when the wall was built outside of Al Quds University in Abu Dis rather than encircling and cutting it off from the West Bank, but by and large the issue of occupation has forestalled any substantial progress in the area of academic freedom in Palestinian society.

On Palestinian universities today, clan politics, the political movements, and the Palestinian security forces represent the main barrier to academic freedom as well as the freedom of thought, expression, research, organization, and assembly.

The quality of Palestinian universities, particularly teaching and professor-student relations, have been in steady decline over the course of the last decade. Cronyism between teachers and students has developed into a widespread phenomenon, with

faculty oversight of cheating or “buying” good grades and other unethical academic practices.

The independence of each constituent element of the universities (student bodies, teachers union, administrators) is not respected, leading to restrictions on the freedom to assemble and conduct independent activities (student council elections, lectures, etc.) on the campus.

The free production of and access to knowledge has not only been limited by this situation, but become overly personalized as a result of undue bureaucratic and political interference in campus affairs, and restricted budgets.

Freedom of thought and the right to choose academic partners as well as freedom of expression are inalienable for Palestinian students but rather subject to political considerations of the university staff (and by proxy security forces), intervening clans/families, and political parties .

The rights of students or professors to assemble or freely associate to political parties or social movements is often contingent upon receiving permission from the university administration, which either comes at the heels of censorship or the administration’s refusal to allow certain activities to take place.

The resolution of conflicts on Palestinian campuses through peaceful, civic means is not institutionalized or taught to a sufficient degree.

Neither Palestinian academy nor society has ingrained the notion of the social responsibility of academics, or that professors themselves must act as role models to promote the type of citizenry and ethics that they teach about in the classroom.

Discussion: Hebrew University

Several important comments were made by the participants in the workshop at Hebrew University.

The participants agreed that there is not enough awareness of the issue on the Israeli side and something should be done to raise awareness. The participants also agreed that academics should be able to have free and open dialogue. In addition some of the participants agreed that academics on both sides were not doing enough to convince and pressure their governments to end occupation.

Some of the participants wondered why should we focus on this issue when there are many other issues that are no less important. Prof. Kaufman replied by saying that it is a matter of social responsibility and social activism.

Prof. Kaufman maintain that there is room for boycott as a legitimate non-violent tool of social resistance but that the boycott should be a selective or targeted boycott

which would allow for dialogue between like minded people which are interested in working towards a solution. However, some were skeptical about convincing the Israelis to accept even a selective boycott.

Some participants asked what should be the specific definition of social responsibility for each community. Since the situation is asymmetrical the level of social responsibility is also asymmetrical.

There is also no clear definition of the occupation and its borders.

Some of the participants wondered if it is really effective to have this discussion between like-minded people. However, they also argued that if members of academia can't have open dialogue between them there is little hope for such dialogue to take place between statesman and the general public.

Some suggested that cooperation should be build from the bottom up starting at the grassroots level. Others suggested conducting joint projects in a neutral place i.e. a third country. Furthermore, some wondered if the aim was to establish cooperation on specific research areas or cooperate in social activism and if so what can we as academic contribute as activists to academic research?

During the discussion participants also raised the question of how can we cooperate as equals in a situation of inequality? Can we and should we separate political activism, inequality, and good research? It can be problematic to be an objective scientist on the one hand and sympathize with the other side on the other. Politicizing academia could actually hurt academic freedom and research. If we are to formulate guidelines for cooperation should it be political or not? Because once you bring politics into it academia it complicates things and makes people less willing to take part. Moreover, several of the participants were concerned that taking a stand on this issue could further damage that already fragile image and credibility of the academia in the eyes of the public.

Another point that was made by the participants referred to the homogeneous nature of the group of people that support this cause. Accordingly, the people who support these issues and are active on the matter are always the same group of people but they do not seem to manage to influence the general public. The challenge would be, how do we reach new people, people that don't usually support or are involved in such matters.

Discussion: University of Haifa

Manar Faraj, a guest speaker, talked about her experience as a Palestinian and an academic. She spoke about a project that she was involved in that in which she talks Palestinian students to Auschwitz to learn about the Holocaust and she takes Israeli students to where Arab villages used to be but were destroyed. The purpose of these visits was to get both sides to understand and recognize the other's pain.

Some of the participants in the meeting agreed that it was not possible to work with the Palestinians as equals because of the occupation and that this is why social responsibility is important and necessary. But the participants wondered what exactly is our social responsibility in this situation. They wondered if we could have academic equality without political equality.

They also agreed that it is important to have a selective boycott, one which will not prevent open dialogue.

Some of the participants thought the involvement of the third party could provide a solution but recognized the difficulty to find a third party willing to go against the BDS.

Once again the issue of social and political activism vs. good objective research came up. How can we separate the two? Should we bring politics into academia? How can a researcher become socially and politically involved without it affecting his work?

Discussion: Tel Aviv University

Several points were raised by the participants in the meeting that were already mentioned in the two previous meetings as well.

Again the issue of balancing social and political activism with good objective research was brought up. Some of the participants felt it would be wrong to politicize academia, they want to keep politics away from the class room and fear that it will harm their work as researchers. On the other hand some of the participants felt that it is possible to balance the two and that they do need to take a social stand. Prof. Kaufman raised the point that there is a difference between objectivity and neutrality and that being neutral doesn't necessarily mean being objective.

Some of the participants argued that it is not the purpose of academia to improve the life of people and to take a social or political stand but only to conduct research that seeks the truth. If we do not define research as the quest for the truth it could hurt the credibility of the research, therefore the only commitment of researchers is to the study of the truth.

Some of the participants were concerned that taking a stand on this issue can prove to be difficult because of the declining status of academia in Israel. They claimed there

is a growing gap between members of academia and the general public. The public is no longer interested in listening to what members of academia have to say. They consider all members of academia to be leftwing extremists and dismiss their opinion. This raises that question of how members of academia can reach the general public and have a stronger impact.

Participants also mentioned the fact that these discussions were usually taking place between like-minded people that already support the issue and that we should find a way to reach those that are not aware of the issue or are against it in order to really have a meaningful effect.

Some of the participants in the meeting noted that another reason why the Palestinians were not willing to cooperate with Israeli universities was because they are involved in the occupation. On the other side some participants argued that the Israeli universities want to cooperate with the Palestinians more than the Palestinians want to cooperate with the Israelis which actually puts the Israeli universities at a weaker position.