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THE NEXT GENERATION: STUDENTS AND POLITICS AT BIRZEIT
UNIVERSITY, WEST BANK

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Introduction

Universities have long been seen as the birthplace of political movements. When opposition arises against the strong government in control in the Middle East, the universities are often the first place shut down. The space they provide as a means for organizing and developing political agendas threatens tight grips on power. In the Palestinian context, university space has been seen as the means to develop political resistance and leadership against the Israeli occupation and to support a budding democratic system. This was particularly true in the case of the first Intifada, where many universities became hubs of activism. The academic literature covered student movements extensively during this period. Fifteen years later, students' attitudes and behaviors towards politics have changed and apathy towards the political system has grown. At the same time, election results at these universities are hotly contested and voter turnout is remarkably high. How can we reconcile indifferent attitudes towards institutions but high political participation in these university elections?

The majority of academic literature on Palestine focuses on three separate components: the occupation, ineffective governance by the PA, and the Palestinian economy. However, our research shows that these factors are intertwined and together exert influence on the university sphere. Any analysis on student politics should take into account the interacting factors that shape their environment. These interactions create new pieces that lie outside the traditional spectrum of Student Council politics and new actors that do not identify with the established system. Therefore, any understanding of future Palestinian leadership will have to take into account the current conditions affecting the youth.

At the same time, student elections become a national conversation extending to communities and media outside the university. In the recent 2015 elections at Birzeit University

(BZU), the Hamas-affiliated Islamic Bloc (IB) won a majority of seats for the first time since 2007. Within 24 hours, articles from major media outlets such as Al-Jazeera, the Economist, and Haaretz all covered the election results, deeming it a “sea [of] change.”¹ We agree that the recent Hamas win is significant, but it is a stronger indicator of student dissatisfaction with the PA than an embrace of Islamist ideology. Participation in these elections is a low cost way for students to express themselves politically and it is one of the only ways to do so given the lack of national elections. Student elections are hotly contested because they are the only institution in which the PA is responsive to student concerns. They provide the closest thing to a democratic exchange between the government and its constituents.

Through interviews at Birzeit University (BZU) supplemented with locally conducted public opinion polling data, we have concluded that the next generation of Palestinian leaders will be uniquely shaped by the inability of the PA to effectively govern, the changing economic climate, and decades of occupation. These circumstances have placed undue pressure on university elections as the critical political platform in the West Bank. As a result of the over-politicization of the Student Council, disillusioned students have turned to alternative methods of community engagement and resisting occupation.

Significance of BZU to Palestine

BZU is a critical case study because it is seen as the birthplace of all types of Palestinian leadership. The students that emerged from the university in the late 1980s went on to become leaders in the PA, political parties, NGOs, local governance, and more. Birzeit continues to draw political significance from its proximity to the center of PA power in Ramallah. Despite the limitations of our sample size, we argue that BZU provides insights into the political attitudes and behaviors of Palestinian university students at large.

¹ Khoury, J. (2015, April 26). Hamas wins Birzeit University student council election for first time since 2007 -

A recent statistical analysis conducted by MIFTAH and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reinforces our conclusions by including data from universities throughout the West Bank and Gaza. While university elections remain important, disillusionment with the current political system is growing, and this is creating new actors and new kinds of political engagement. The study found that 47.5% participated in their most recent elections, and 52% said the results could be seen as a gauge of political views on the Palestinian streets.² Although BZU voter turnout may be higher than the university average for the Palestinian territories, the importance of elections is shared to an extent by all Palestinian universities. However, the study also found that political interest does not necessarily reflect political participation in the party structure. While 73% claimed that they had an interest in discussing political issues, only 38.7% expressed a desire for political participation and 26.2% considered themselves active in student political activities.³ These findings are consistent with our assertion that university elections maintain an important role in campus life and the greater Palestinian society, but are not inclusive of all political and community actors that will affect the future of Palestinian leadership.

Policy Recommendations

Unlike the PA, BZU is in a better position to reform its institutions to better prepare for the future. As a private university, it has some authority over its sources and usage of funding. Furthermore, both the administration and faculty expressed sincere interest in our project and its findings. They recognize that they are faced with a generational change in student attitudes and behaviors, and they want to know why and how they can best adapt as an educational institution. We propose that BZU should develop a space for independent students to engage in political

² "MIFTAH announces the survey results on perceptions of university students, youth, and women political participation." (2015, February 15), Retrieved May 5, 2015, from <http://www.miftah.org/Display.cfm?DocId=26277&CategoryId=36>.

³ Ibid.

dialogue outside of the traditional party system; address issues of corruption within parties on campus; and encourage an open dialogue between politically affiliated and unaffiliated students. These actions will better prepare non-party affiliates to engage in community leadership and improve communication between political parties and unaffiliated Palestinians. Additionally, the university should enact election reform to limit the funds student parties can use around the election period so that results are a reflection of party platforms rather than financial incentives and party resources. By addressing these considerations, BZU could significantly contribute to building productive cohesion within the Palestinian national movement and continue its legacy of contributing to its leadership.

Methodology

Based on the literature, the common methods of field research include individual interviews, media analysis, and survey research. We conducted individual interviews with students, faculty, and leadership regarding the organization of students at Birzeit University, aiming to contextualize traditional survey-type questions with individual experiences at all levels of the university. A key component to our question is the perception of these groups, their actions, and the basis of their identity, which could only be acquired through this kind of direct and anecdotal responses. These interviews were facilitated by the BZU Public Relations Office, who put us in contact with students and faculty across the university. We interviewed four student leaders from the political party affiliates and three self-proclaimed independent students. Three of the four leaders were male; one of the three independent students was male.⁴ These audio-recorded interviews were conducted in English, but interviewees were free to respond in Arabic if they felt more comfortable doing so. It is important to note that these

⁴ These students studied Business Administration, Law, Nutrition, Engineering, and Political Science.

interviews took place in the time between Student Councils; the Student Council from the previous year disbanded to allow for elections to occur after the publication of our research.

We added focus groups to understand the dynamics between students regarding politics. By interviewing students in a group setting, they were allowed to discuss amongst themselves topics, which built more complex responses and encouraged reflection on different points of view. We conducted two group interviews of unaffiliated students, primarily from the School of Law and the School of Political Science. The first group was first and second year law students and consisted of eight women. The second group comprised twelve second and third year law students and one alumnus who currently works in the law school. These audio-recorded interviews were conducted in English but the interviewees responded in both English and Arabic.

We also interviewed several members of the administration and faculty, including the Advisor to the Student Council, the dean of the Faculty of Law and Public Administration, two law faculty, a professor from the Faculty of Arts, and the head of the Public Relations Office. We also conducted interviews with two researchers from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), who helped us find relevant studies and resources for our research.

Table 1.1 - Breakdown of Core Interview Subjects

| | Total | Male | Female |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| Student Political Leaders | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Independent Students | 24 | 1 | 23 |
| Professors and Administration | 7 | 4 | 3 |

Media analysis in English and in Arabic and survey research from established sources provided us with information about the majority of the population we cannot reach through our

interviews and focus groups. We made use of local news outlets and social media coverage of these organizations for part of this analysis. We specifically looked at the Facebook pages and official websites of the student parties, which were in Arabic. We also used surveys and statistics from PCPSR, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the World Bank, and the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Limitations of this Study

This study is limited by a small sample size (35 individuals) and a disproportionate number of female unaffiliated interviewees⁵. Since we only interviewed 28 students out of a total population of over 10,000, we cannot say with statistical certainty that these students represent BZU as a whole. Additionally, most were also political science or law students, which may have allowed for a more critical analysis of Palestinian politics and student movements because of their higher sense of political consciousness. However, life in Palestine cannot be depoliticized because of the everyday effects of Israeli occupation. Therefore these students provide a general sense of student attitudes.

Our study was also limited to one university given our contacts and time in the West Bank. We believe BZU is a politically significant case, because of existing academic literature confirmed by statements on the ground. Nevertheless, whether BZU represents all of Palestine still remains an issue. Palestine is home to many universities and all of them have contested elections and political sensibilities as well as different student body compositions. Many, both inside and outside the university, point to scholarships available for poorer students as evidence of socioeconomic diversity (32% of students received some sort of financial assistance from the

⁵ BZU is 64% female and 36% male. Birzeit University, P. (n.d.). Facts and Figures 2014-2015. Birzeit University: From Our past Heritage and Present Creativity We Build the Future.

university in 2012-2013).⁶ We have not found quantitative data describing the socioeconomic makeup of the student body. Furthermore, it is difficult to ascertain the geographic diversity of BZU. Restrictions on mobility severely limit Gazan students from attending West Bank universities.⁷ Even within the West Bank, checkpoints and indirect routes hinder travel between cities. That being said, the importance of studying BZU lies not in its representation of Palestine, but in the important role it has played in Palestinian politics and society.

Literature Review

Social Movements

We draw our conceptual framework from social movement literature with a particular focus on contentious politics. Contentious politics is defined as “interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs.”⁸ The study of contentious politics considers all movements of collective action of resistance as a unique human phenomenon with common characteristics.

In the 1960s, the field developed a universal model to explain the mechanics of contentious politics as a system of inputs and outputs: a particular blend of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, collective action frames, and repertoires of contention produces a particular result.⁹ Scholars understood contentious politics as the reflection of the available opportunities, social networks, cultural frameworks, and available tools. However, their frames were too narrow, and the analyses of the social movement model were incapable of

⁶ "Birzeit University Annual Report 2012-2013." Birzeit University, 2013. Web. 6 May 2015.

⁷ Right to Education Campaign – Birzeit University. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://right2edu.birzeit.edu/>

⁸ Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious Politics*. Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 4.

⁹ McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Charles, T. (2001). *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 14.

encompassing all of the inputs and interactions necessary for explaining the more complex cases, particularly outside of Western democracies.¹⁰

Current scholars, such as Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam, challenge the normative models of the 1960s and narrow their scope of study. Rather than defining a single system of contentious politics, they analyze the different processes and mechanisms that take place in a variety of historical cases.¹¹ Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam structure their understanding of contentious politics as the operation of different processes composed of a specific combination of mechanisms, and they embed these processes in their historical and political contexts. Mechanisms are events that shape the relationships between elements in a particular way and can occur at the environmental, relational, and conceptual level;¹² processes are a particular combination of mechanisms. By focusing on processes and their component mechanisms, the current literature allows for a more dynamic understanding of contentious politics and its changing inputs and actors.

Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam identify brokerage, diffusion, and coordination as common mechanisms found in processes of social movements such as radicalization, polarization, and reshaping the balance of power.¹³ In the case of student politics in Palestine, coordination and division - mechanisms that define the interactions between parties - shape the larger processes of student mobilization and party polarization on campus.

Methods of Resistance

Wendy Pearlman brings this body of literature into the Palestinian case and analyzes the changing nature of collective action in the national movement, particularly regarding its use of violence and nonviolence. Pearlman criticizes Tilly's failure to adequately address changes in the

¹⁰ McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 18.

¹¹ McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 24.

¹² McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 24-26.

¹³ McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 33.

internal organization of movements in his study of the mechanisms and processes of contentious politics.¹⁴ She analyzes the shifting organizational structure of the Palestinian national movement to identify critical factors in determining methods of resistance.

Her organizational mediation theory of protest illustrates how an organization's internal structure shapes the mechanisms and processes of contentious politics.¹⁵ Organizational structure influences the repertoire of contention, or the available methods of resistance. Internal structural cohesion increases the possibility of nonviolent action, and fragmentation increases the possibility of violent action. Fragmentation must be managed to support a repertoire of nonviolent action. Pearlman attributes the lack of cooperation and movement fragmentation in the second Intifada to the stifling of the nonviolent methods of resistance that the robust civil society of the first Intifada was able to employ.¹⁶

Pearlman illustrates how the interaction of different mechanisms results in different processes. She emphasizes that the addition of conflict with an out-group does not always produce unity in the in-group: threat from a common enemy, Israel, does not always result in the unification of the Palestinian resistance. In the second Intifada, Israeli aggression exacerbated intra-Palestinian tensions and fueled the fragmentation that prevented the effective use of collective nonviolent resistance.¹⁷

Mary Elizabeth King highlights the limitations of social movement literature in explaining the role ordinary citizens in nonviolent collective action. Like Pearlman, King attributes methods of resistance to changing pressures and organizational structure. She illustrates how average citizens, including women, students, and communities developed

¹⁴ Pearlman, W. (2011). *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 5.

¹⁵ Pearlman, 7-8.

¹⁶ Pearlman, 185.

¹⁷ Pearlman, 184.

networks critical for nonviolent collective action. Civilian organizations lacked “the normal channels of institutionalized action” and were distinguished by their inclusion of women and comparative transparency and parity. Five major channels produced the collective action during the first Intifada: youth committees, voluntary work committees, the prisoner’s movement, university student movements of the late 70s, and resistance to Israeli control of Palestinian education. As the power of the elite’s decentralized, leadership became more localized and diffuse throughout the network. This allowed them to continue to operate even when leadership was arrested.¹⁸

Although student groups organized around the various factions of the PLO, they built a cooperative network that facilitated collective action across party lines. King argues that the combination of expanding educational opportunities and dwindling job prospects fueled student activism and popular participation. Universities increasingly attracted students from refugee camps, villages, and small towns, which widened the political and social networks on campuses throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Youth committees committed to community service spread from university students to nearby towns and refugee camps. Growing community and student networks decentralized power and provided a foundation for broad participation in resistance.¹⁹

The Role of Palestinian Universities

Much of the literature that exists about the political nature of Palestinian universities addresses the fact that they have been used historically as spaces to create and develop nationalist sentiment, contribute to statebuilding, and for resistance against the Israeli occupation. In addition, these universities are often tied to the non-student community surrounding them, which would also indicate that issues that are being contested in elections are

¹⁸ King, M. (2007). *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance*. New York: Nation Books.

¹⁹ King.

also the concern of the community, and therefore the PA. Although recent scholarship on the role of student politics in the larger, national sphere appears to be limited, the conversation is thriving in the media and at the local level.

Universities in Palestine became degree-conferring institutions in the 1970s but did not become “Palestinian Universities” until the first Intifada in 1986, when the Israeli military began to interfere in its educational processes.²⁰ They increasingly became subjugated to Israeli military control, forced with numerous checkpoints and administrative detentions that prohibited the academic growth of faculty and students. This in turn led to the universities being looked upon more as a space for political growth and nationalism rather than a space for education.²¹ Palestinian political leaders, from the Intifadas to the Madrid Conference to PA governance and party leadership, all emerged from the political arena in universities.²² The role of youth, therefore, is seen as a crucial part of the nationalist struggle. This can be seen through the Israeli closures of universities during times of protest as well as increasing national attention to university elections to gauge national opinion on the status quo.

Literature regarding social movements, specifically ones relating to students and youth, seem to take place in a temporal framework using the first and second Intifadas as reference points. Bruhn’s piece on Palestinian universities divides the movement into three segments divided by the Intifadas, describing the current stage as post second Intifada characterizing the universities in crisis mode.²³ Students are increasingly under threat from Israel in terms of administrative detention and imprisonment and from the PA in terms of restrictions on freedom

²⁰ Hammond, K. (2007). Palestinian Universities and the Israeli Occupation. *Policy Futures in Education*, 5(2), 264-270.

²¹ Bruhn, C. (2006). Higher Education as Empowerment: The Case of Palestinian Universities. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(8), 1125-1142.

²² Al-Jariri, Ihab. "The Palestinian Student Movement After Oslo." *Palestine - Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 1.4 (2000): 32. *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

²³ Bruhn.

of speech as well as controls on funding. Additionally, the universities face pressure from the international community; money that comes in from the outside often faces political restrictions on the behalf of Israel and the United States.

Other literature focuses on the emergence of the ineffective PA governance as a grievance and point of student organization. The corruption of the PA has a significant impact on student movements and attitudes. Perhaps the most recent movement on a national scale has been the March 15 movement in 2011. Inspired by the uprisings in the surrounding countries, youth movements united across the West Bank and Gaza to call for the end of the divided government of the Hamas and Fatah parties. The movement organized a rally around Nakba Day later that year in May but did not manage to sustain their mobilization beyond 2011, due to later party ownership of the events and subsequent factionalization.²⁴ This article also sees the youth as a possible alternative to the factionalization of the PA government.²⁵ As was mentioned earlier, this literature takes this mobilization in the context of the previous Intifadas and compares the circumstances of 2011 to 1987 and 2000.

Birzeit University

Introduction

BZU, the oldest university in Palestine, sits in the town of Birzeit, located 4.5 miles from Ramallah and 12.5 miles from Jerusalem. According to the university, it sees the goal of itself and the other Palestinian universities it works with as developing “educational institutions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory that can provide Palestinian students with the knowledge, skills

²⁴ Balley, P. (2012, March 19). March 15 one year later in Gaza: Has the fire gone cold? Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://mondoweiss.net/2012/03/march-15-one-year-later-in-gaza-has-the-fire-gone-cold>

²⁵ Høigilt, J. (201). The Palestinian Spring That Was Not: The Youth and Political Activism In The Occupied Palestine. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 35(4), 343-359.

and awareness needed to serve their society in a changing global environment.”²⁶ The university also has a requirement for every student to complete 120 hours of community service prior to graduation, one that many students exceed.

Its location next to the center of PA power has allowed it to become one of the most influential institutions in the West Bank; leaders of major political parties, government, NGOs, and businesses consider themselves alumni. During the Intifadas, the university “translated those stones [meaning children throwing stones that became the image associated with the Intifada] into an articulate appeal to the international community for an end to the Israeli occupation.”²⁷ It has provided the necessary space for the development of nationalism and leadership. Its elections are considered to be significant in determining the political climate of the Palestine.

The Student Council

Upon BZU’s designation as a university in the 1970s, the Student Council was created by the leftist student factions.²⁸ The Council is run by an 11-member executive committee and has 51 seats. The Student Council is in charge of putting together all student activities on campus. In the earlier stages, control of the Student Council was largely in leftist factions’ hands, sometimes jointly with the Fatah party affiliate, the Student Youth Movement (SYM). Hamas grew in popularity after the Oslo Agreement was signed; the dissatisfaction with the result led many to sympathize with the bombings done by the Hamas-affiliated Al-Qassam brigades in retaliation. As a result, control of the Student Council has been mainly a competition between the SYM and the Hamas affiliate, the Islamic Bloc (IB). The Student Council elections are highly competitive and garner widespread national attention; since there have been no PA elections in the last nine years, these university elections are often seen as the gauge of national sentiment towards the

²⁶ Birzeit University, P. (n.d.). Informational Pamphlet. Birzeit University: From Our Heritage and Present Creativity We Build the Future.

²⁷ Bruhn.

²⁸ Al-Jariri.

parties, citing the fact that the IB won control of the Student Council the same year Hamas won the national elections.

Political Parties and their Activities

The political parties have a longstanding tradition of being involved in the university through their student affiliate groups. SYM is the Fatah affiliate. According to the official website and statements from a student representative, SYM focuses its attentions on raising student awareness about nationalist issues and ameliorating the financial burdens of students.²⁹ Their Facebook page circulates information regarding recently arrested Palestinian activists, particularly youth, and nationalist rhetoric – everything from historical photos to current speeches by student leaders.³⁰ Other activities mentioned in the interview with the SYM representative included concerts, magazines, demonstrations, student festivals, and community service.³¹

It is interesting to note that most independent students characterized SYM activities by incentivizing votes through financial means by providing free phone credits and other bribes. Many also mention that SYM sells cheaper books branded with Fatah symbols on the cover to students, a fact reinforced by pictures of these sales on their official website. Local experts interviewed from nearby Ramallah also confirm SYM's use of financial means to garner support.³² This was the case twenty years ago as well; the SYM's ties with the Fatah party and PNA led a decrease in student support after the perceived failures of the Oslo Agreement. As

²⁹ Jami'at a-Shuhada. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.shabiba-bzu.org/>

³⁰ Harakt a-Shabibat A-Tulabiyat fi Jami'at Birzeit. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <https://www.facebook.com/shabeba.bzu>

³¹ Interview with SYM leader [Personal interview]. (2015, March 18).

³² Interview with PCPSR [Personal interview]. (2015, March 19).

Fatah fractured, the SYM was consumed by the internal politics and tens of thousands of dollars were allocated to the student group by various factions in Fatah.³³

Hamas's affiliate, IB, has grown in popularity over the last two decades and is now the significant challenger to the SYM. It sees its primary activities as more cultural and works to put on lecture series that promote religion and the Palestinian cause.³⁴ IB does not have an official website like SYM, but maintains an active Facebook page in which they circulate religious quotes, prisoner updates, and nationalist rhetoric.³⁵ IB, like SYM, also gives away free items around election week. A few weeks before the 2015 student elections, IB posted on Facebook that they were providing school supplies, such as USB drives, to Birzeit graduates. Most Birzeit students are less likely, however, to associate IB with buying votes than SYM.

The leftist bloc, called the Progressive Democratic Student Pole (PDSP) today, actually created the Student Council back in the 1970s. Dissatisfaction with the party politics between the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and discrepancy between party ideology and practice, the student bodies of the two groups united to form this "Third Pole" in 1995. This movement, according to former BZU political science student Ihab Al-Jariri, represented the "alternative to political repression represented by Fatah and to the social repression represented by Hamas."³⁶

The PDSP won seven seats in the Student Council in 2014, which can be seen as enough to maintain relevance but not powerful enough to drive the organization.³⁷ Its activities are

³³ Al-Jariri, Ihab.

³⁴ Interview with IB leaders [Personal interview]. (2015, March 18).

³⁵ Al-Kutla al-Islamiyya fi Jami'at Birzeit. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <https://www.facebook.com/kutla.berzit> This facebook page was accessible April 14, 2015 but the page appeared to be taken down on April 21, 2015.

³⁶ Al-Jariri.

³⁷ Fatah Wins Majority in Birzeit University Student Council Elections. (2013, April 17). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.birzeit.edu/news/fatah-wins-majority-birzeit-university-student-council-elections>

primarily characterized as focusing on alleviating financial pressures for poorer students.³⁸ Both SYM and PDSP operated alternative cafeterias outside of the student union to provide cheaper food. The administration shut both initiatives down because they drew students away from the main cafeterias, which cost Birzeit significant revenue and was against the university policy.³⁹

Generational Differences

When asked if they perceived any differences between their generation and their parents' generation, the majority of students responded affirmatively without hesitation. Most students had romantic notions of the past; however, the reasons for nostalgia varied from student to student.

Depending on party affiliation, student political leaders ascribed different qualities to the past generation. Members of IB view the past generation as more conservative, stating that the current generation was more liberal.⁴⁰ The representative from PDSP asserted that the previous generation was more active and that her generation needs to start putting ideas into action.⁴¹ The member of the SYM was the primary exception to this trend. Instead of romanticizing the past generation, he pointed out that the past generation was more militant and he felt violence should be a last resort.⁴²

Unaffiliated students pointed to the differences in levels of education; their parents and grandparents, particularly the women, had fewer educational opportunities. As the conversation developed, students would conclude that despite the lack of formal education, many people were more "intelligent."⁴³ They read books of their own accord and strove for personal betterment.

Today, students don't read books, at least not in their spare time. One even questioned whether a

³⁸ Interview with PDSP [Personal interview]. (2015, March 18).

³⁹ Interview with Student Council Advisor [Personal interview]. (2015, March 18).

⁴⁰ Interview with IB leaders.

⁴¹ Interview with PDSP.

⁴² Interview with SYM leader.

⁴³ Group Interview Two [Personal interview]. (2015, March 19).

Birzeit student could really tell you what was in a book after they were finished reading, as education tends to be more about achieving good grades rather than intellectual improvement.

To illustrate their point, they described what it would be like to read a book in the center of campus. Kamal Nasser is a major social hub outside the student union/cafeteria - like a quad on an American university campus. Many students congregate in Kamal Nasser between and after classes. Students associate Kamal Nasser with outward displays of wealth and social status, particularly name brands. They agreed that students would draw weird looks if they wanted to read a book in Kamal Nasser: it is just not done. One student exaggerated that she would have to go to the woods at edge of campus to read.⁴⁴ The picture they painted of Birzeit as an academic space is juxtaposed with observations of the previous generation of Palestinian students.

Dr. Sonia Nimer, a professor of philosophy at BZU and an accomplished children's author, added a layer of context to the students' comments. Dr. Nimer is a prominent member of the Palestinian resistance and was imprisoned from 1975-1978 and for a week during the first Intifada.⁴⁵ She embeds the student activism at BZU in the 1980s within global context of socialist and leftist movements. She said it was an era of international solidarity, which made the Palestinian youth feel like they were a part of something bigger and that the world was with their cause.⁴⁶

They also mentioned generational differences that were related to age. In one group interview, a student mentioned that people become more neutral towards occupation as they grow older and that people are more revolutionary when they are young.⁴⁷ This comment is juxtaposed with the conclusions from many independents and politically unaffiliated students

⁴⁴ Group Interview Two.

⁴⁵ Rahmeh, T. (2004, April 16). MIFTAH.ORG--Pieces of Pain, Portraits of Victory. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.miftah.org/PrinterF.cfm?DocId=3517>

⁴⁶ Interview with Dr. Sonia Nimer [Telephone interview]. (2015, April 7).

⁴⁷ Group Two Interview.

that the current generation is less active than the previous. One independent student claimed that events are not well attended on campus, even ones that political parties united around in organizing. She mentioned that a past rally for an arrested student drew no more than 100 out of 10,000 students at the university. Another recalled the dwindling number of busses organized to take students to O'far, the nearby Israeli prison. However, when they talked about the revolutionary attitudes and behaviors of the youth, they pointed exactly to the students who feel compelled to go protest at O'far. It is possible that the commitment to resistance has not waned, but has instead manifested in a different way.

Ineffective Governance

Palestinian Authority: Party Polarization and Corruption

While the ending the occupation remains the primary issue for most Palestinians, a growing concern is the ineffectiveness of the PA. The failures of the Oslo Agreement are still mentioned by the Palestinian public as a grievance against their government. Party polarization, primarily between Fatah and Hamas, has grown since the 2006 split following the Hamas victory in democratic national elections. With Hamas governing the Gaza Strip and Fatah the West Bank, each of the parties has cracked down on its citizens, repressing freedom of speech and assembly. Hamas in particular is singled out in the West Bank by the PA, often subjecting supporters to arrests in addition to those of the IDF. The Palestine Papers sparked outrage in the territories, as Al-Jazeera exposed Fatah compliance with the British MI6 intelligence in cracking down on the Hamas party within the West Bank.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Erekat quits over Palestine Papers - Al Jazeera English. (2011, February 13). Retrieved December 15, 2014, from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/2011212135152355248.html>

The Fatah-led PA structure within the West Bank has faced increased criticism from within the territory and outside because of its harsh human rights abuses including detention without trial and torture.⁴⁹ In March 2011, 10,000 youth in Gaza City protested for a unified government, criticizing the split between Hamas and Fatah that had lasted for years of divided government. These protests were also coordinated with youth movements in the West Bank, where even more youth turned out. While seemingly paltry in turnout compared to mobilizations in the surrounding countries in the preceding months, this is significant because it was one that was unauthorized and also against the Palestinian government rather than the typical protests against Israeli occupation.⁵⁰

Another significant concern due to ineffective governance is corruption. Since the Fatah party coming to power with the creation of the PA, many both within and outside of Palestine have concluded that party leadership under Yasser Arafat had focused more on retaining control of governance rather than delivering service. This system of neopatrimonialism created an organization that was on the surface modern and fair but emphasized the value of connections over constitutionalism.⁵¹ Polls conducted after the beginning of his leadership found that 69% of Palestinians thought there was a lack of democracy and 90% believed that PA positions were unfairly filled.⁵² His rule was based on familial alliance to preserve loyalty and “neglected instituting law and principles of good governance and bypassed the Palestinian Council and judicial system whenever possible”.⁵³ Corruption has also extended to the misuse of international

⁴⁹ Black, I., & Milne, S. (2011, January 25). Palestine papers reveal MI6 drew up plan for crackdown on ... Retrieved February 22, 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/25/palestine-papers-mi6-hamas-crackdown>

⁵⁰ Bronner, E. (2011, May 4). Palestinian Factions Sign Accord to End Rift. Retrieved February 19, 2015, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/middleeast/05palestinians.html>

⁵¹ Brynen, R. (1995). The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 23-36.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Jarbawi, A., & Pearlman, W. (2007). Struggle in Post-charisma Transition: Rethinking Palestinian Politics after Arafat. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 36(4).

funds with reports of over 2 billion Euros between 2008-2012.⁵⁴ Numerous reports from both Western and local Arab sources have accused the PA of transferring funds to groups beyond the original intent. The security component is nearly 35% of the total budget while just 5% is designated to both the Ministries of Education and Health.

Effect of Ineffective Governance on BZU: Inter-party Coordination, Disillusionment, and Outside Influence

Ineffective governance on the part of the PA heavily influences all citizens' perceptions of political governance. The dean of the Law School, Asem Khalil, characterized it as such: "Students are the extension and the reflection of the disorder and disunity in Palestinian society." Polarization is most felt regarding party behaviors, specifically in the Student Council and its elections.

When asked if inter-party coordination existed, all student political leaders were quick to point out that cooperation was much stronger on campus than it was outside the campus. The SYM leader says that BZU was different than other universities because of its stronger party relations. He also says that the campus atmosphere was markedly different than the PA, saying the rift between the parties was felt with leaders of the party, not with the student affiliates on campus. The student from PDSP said: "We are students, not politicians," in her response, stating that while relations and progress on campus may be less than ideal, relations are better than on the national scene. The IB leader was more hesitant, saying that the level of coordination between the parties was actually pretty low on what he deemed to be substantial political issues relating to the nation as a whole, saying that cooperation only existed for issues of what he deemed to be of lesser importance.

⁵⁴ Ramahi, S. (2013, December 14). Corruption in the Palestinian Authority. Retrieved April 19, 2015, from <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/resources/reports-and-publications/8820-corruption-in-the-palestinian-authority>

Disillusionment with the PA among these leaders falls under party lines. The SYM, is the least hesitant to respond that they had a higher level of cooperation on campus. Students from the IB had a higher level of disillusionment both with party cooperation on campus as well as felt increasingly threatened from the PA, a point that was not brought up by any other student leader. Both IB students interviewed say that increased arrests by both the Israeli forces and the PA would cause further unrest in the near future.

The view of inter-party cooperation from the administration was slightly different from the student political leaders on campus. Asem Khalil says that Student Council coordination is better on campus than in the PA because they have yet another common enemy: the university administration. The advisor to the Student Council, a member of the BZU administration, stated that the main obstacle to the Council's progress did not actually stem from the university policy but from the competition amongst the parties themselves. The parties cooperated with each other on any cause relating to the nation as a whole, specifically citing the 2014 Gaza War, student martyrdom, and student prisoners. If any of these issues rises to importance, competition between the parties cease and they will often work together on creating student gatherings or demonstrations. This can be seen by Facebook posts by all of the main parties regarding the April 2015 death of a young man at the hands of Israeli soldiers; IB and SYM both posted a tribute to this 'martyr,' despite the fact that he was not currently attending the university.⁵⁵⁵⁶

Outside Influence on Student Political Life

Reasons for joining the Student Council or choosing to remain unaffiliated differ among the students. One student, who identified as an independent, said she chose what organizations to become a part of because of their unaffiliated, non-party based focus on community service.

⁵⁵ Harakt a-Shabibat A-Tulabiyat fi Jami'at Birzeit.

⁵⁶ Al-Kutla al-Islamiyya fi Jami'at Birzeit

Many independent students, when asked why students join political groups on campus, cite family pressure or family connections as the primary motivator. The political leaders, on the other hand, said they chose to join their parties mainly to improve the well being of those around them and achieve the goal of an independent Palestine, without any mention of family pressures. Members from PDSP and IB in particular cited that they had wanted to be part of the Student Council and their respective political party before they even entered the college. The IB member said that he identified with the Hamas party prior to joining BZU and wanted to carry that message to the student population, thus his involvement with his party. The SYM member cited his grandfather's opinion on student elections as significant to Palestine as a whole as a response to a separate question; it was not clear from his response whether or not his involvement with the party was due to his family involvement.

The view from the independent students is far more pessimistic, seeing the parties and the Student Council as ineffective. The unaffiliated students all looked down upon the reasons that students chose to join these political parties, saying that most did so for family reasons and connections. This perception was echoed by both unaffiliated student interviewees as well as informed Palestinians from outside the university. Support for parties on campus, according to these unaffiliated student interviews, was largely restricted to younger first-year students.

The elections, which occur in May every year, have had a turnout of anywhere from 70%-75% over the last five years.⁵⁷ More than one student said that the elections often bring too much of the outside political strife into the campus. One said that the elections were often just a reason for the IB and SYM to "bash each other" rather than form meaningful political platforms.⁵⁸ Of the interviewees outside the Student Council, both student and administration, all

⁵⁷ Fatah Wins Majority in Birzeit University Student Elections.

⁵⁸ Group Interview Two.

remarked that the goal of the Student Council should be for the students rather than politics outside the campus. However, most of the time, it was reduced to strife. The political parties acknowledge, at least on their respective websites and Facebook pages, that the goal of their group is to better the condition of the students with no mention of the outside affiliated parties.⁵⁹⁶⁰ When asked what the top three issues facing students are, all the student leaders listed the financial concerns of paying tuition and room and board first. Any mention of politics referred to the desire for an independent Palestine, rather than the struggle for power within the PA, with the significant exception of the IB members stating the arrest of their students at the hands of both Israeli and PA security forces. This shows dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs that is unique to one group of students and indicates a reason for political strife on campus. This political strife is a critical complaint of the independent students who are losing faith in the current system.

Changing Economic Climate

The Rise of Ramallah

The economic climate surrounding Birzeit is intimately tied with neighboring city of Ramallah, which is the seat of its governorate (Ramallah and al-Bireh). Ramallah transformed from a small village into the urban pseudo capital of the West Bank in the decades following the Nakba. Students whose parents grew up in Ramallah explain that their families hardly recognize it after all the changes the area has gone through. As seen in Figure 1.2, cost of living and consumption has risen dramatically in the last two decades. The once small town is now dotted

⁵⁹ Harakt a-Shabibat A-Tulabiyat fi Jami'at Birzeit.

⁶⁰ Al-Kutla al-Islamiyya fi Jami'at Birzeit

with apartment complexes and commercial centers, and the border between Ramallah and the neighboring town of al-Bireh has been buried with new construction.⁶¹

Figure 1.2 - Average Household Spending (in Jordanian Dinars)⁶²

| | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 2001 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Take-out⁶³ | 9.9 | 9.9 | 8.5 | 8.1 | 11.0 | 12.1 | 13.0 | 14.4 | 19.8 | 24.3 | 27.3 |
| Housing | 39.3 | 41.5 | 39.8 | 50.9 | 52.6 | 51.7 | 55.2 | 40.3 | 68.9 | 76.7 | 82.6 |
| Rent⁶⁴ | 85.2 | 91.0 | 83.8 | 98.0 | 92.9 | 91.6 | 90.9 | 99.4 | 105.9 | 109.8 | 113.9 |

In their geographic survey of three major urban districts in the West Bank, Lisa Taraki and Rita Giacaman describe Ramallah as a city of refugees and internal immigrants.⁶⁵ Waves of refugees and migrants arrived seeking greater economic prospects, and international NGOs and the PA relocated when Israel imposed greater restrictions on movement between the West Bank and Gaza in the 1990s.⁶⁶ The unemployment rates in the Ramallah and al-Bireh governorate are among the lowest in the West Bank, which explains why it is such a popular destination for internal migration.

Ramallah's economic development has been characterized by rapid growth and inflated GDP from diaspora remittances and investment. A 2007 World Bank report suggests that the economic growth in the West Bank may be misleading and is likely unsustainable.⁶⁷ Political

⁶¹ Assadi, M. (2010, August 2). Ramallah building boom symbolizes West Bank growth. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/08/02/us-palestinians-israel-construction-idUSTRE67129P20100802>

⁶² Average Monthly Household Expenditure and Consumption in Jordanian Dinar (JD) in Palestine by Commodities, Services and Groups, (1996-2011). (2011). Retrieved May 5, 2015, from http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/Expenditure_1996_2011_e.htm

⁶³ "Take away food and meals in restaurants"

⁶⁴ "Estimated rent value of own home"

⁶⁵ Taraki, L., & Giacaman, R. (2006). Modernity Aborted and Reborn, Ways of Being Urban in Palestine. In *Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance, and Mobility under Occupation*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

⁶⁶ Taraki and Giacaman, 27.

⁶⁷ Lakhani, L. (2012, September 10). Fears for bubble burst after Ramallah boom. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/06/world/meast/ramallah-economy-boom/index.html>

economists of the Middle East warn of the issues that arise from a growing number of college-educated youths and a decreasing number of the white-collar jobs that they expect to fill.⁶⁸ The Palestinian Authority supports an inflated public sector, which is further complicated by Israeli control over the release of Palestinian taxes. Public sector salaries are dependent on Israeli-Palestinian relations, and are often subject to fluctuations and delays.

In 2014, the GDP in the West Bank comprised 2.9% agriculture, 23.6% industry, and 73.5% services. Sharbel Shoukair suggests that large amounts of foreign aid produce an economic climate similar to Dutch Disease (the foreign resource curse), and drives employment away from industries and into the service sector.⁶⁹ A successful service economy depends on a reliable flow of money for citizens to buy consumer goods and partake in the leisure activities. The West Bank, and the Ramallah and al-Bireh governorate in particular, is built on a service sector with little safety net to provide their consumers with the money to pay for it. The public sector is the largest employer and lacks a secure pool for salaries, because it depends on foreign aid and taxes released by Israel.⁷⁰

Unemployment in the West Bank

Referencing Figure 1.3, we see that the unemployment rate has improved since the second Intifada and the restrictions on Palestinian labor within Israel. In 2002, the height of the second Intifada, the average unemployment rate in the West Bank was 31.2%. The average unemployment rate has significantly decreased in the following decade, but has yet to return to

⁶⁸ Richards, A., & Waterbury, J. (1990). *A political economy of the Middle East: State, class, and economic development*. Boulder: Westview Press.

⁶⁹ Shoukair, S. (2013, December 1). *The Impact of Foreign Aid and Donations to Palestine on Development of its Economy under Alternative Israeli- Palestinian Economic Interaction Regimes*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from http://eprints.port.ac.uk/14849/1/Final_P.h.D_21_December111-1.pdf

⁷⁰ Eglash, R. (2015, January 3). *Israel withholds tax revenue from Palestinian Authority as dispute escalates*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-withholds-tax-revenues-from-palestinian-authority-as-dispute-escalates/2015/01/03/3718e5c4-9378-11e4-a66f-0ca5037a597d_story.html

pre-Intifada levels (14.3% in 2000). This unemployment rate has important implications for students and universities in the West Bank.

Figure 1.3 - GDP and Unemployment, 2005-2013⁷¹

| | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| GDP Growth (annual %) | 11 | -5 | -2 | -9 | 21 | 2 | 8 | 14 | -4 |
| Unemployment (Ramallah and al-Bireh Governorate, %) | 15.6 | 16.2 | 16.0 | 17.1 | 17.1 | 16.1 | 16.4 | 17.4 | n/a |
| Unemployment (West Bank, %) | 23.5 | 23.7 | 21.7 | 26.6 | 24.5 | 23.7 | 20.9 | 23.0 | n/a |

Economic Effects on BZU: Getting a Job, Paying Tuition, and Technology

Getting a Job

The vast majority of students interviewed were concerned with financial issues, particularly paying for tuition and getting a job after graduation: “How will I graduate, how will I get a job, how will I pay for food?” The unemployment rate of graduates, particularly between the ages of 20 and 29, is on the rise and therefore a primary concern. Although this rate is higher in the Gaza Strip, a significant number of West Bank graduates are also unemployed. In 2012, the average unemployment rate for graduates aged 20-29 in the Palestinian Territories was 50.6%, up from 46.5% in 2011, and a total of 40.9% of West Bank graduates were unemployed in 2012.⁷²

With growing competition in the job market, students are becoming more concerned with how their college education prepares them for employment. Some criticized the Palestinian

⁷¹ Unemployment Rate Among Labour Force Participants in Palestine by Governorate and Sex, 2000-2012. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/unemployment 2000-2012.htm](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/unemployment%2000-2012.htm)

⁷² Statistics Bureau: Rise in Unemployment among New Graduates. (2013, July 8). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=22776>

education system for ineffectively preparing their students for employment in the real world. They study for their exams only to find that what they learned was not useful for their jobs. The changing economic climate requires an adaptable education system to prepare students for needed forms of labor.⁷³

Paying Tuition

Inability to pay their tuition and housing was touted by all students as the number one concern. The university has been shut down multiple times due to student protests against rising tuition, the most recent being in fall 2013. The financial burden of attending university for some students is significant; many attend from relatively poorer parts of the region and families cannot pay the fees because of high unemployment. Most adults, including Dr. Nimer, remarked that BZU tuition is not remarkably different or higher than universities throughout the West Bank.

Technology

With commercialization comes the widespread use of technology in academics, student organizations, and student life. According to the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics, the percentage of households with internet access has increased from 9.2% in 2004 to 30.4% in 2011.⁷⁴ Additionally, the percentage of the population over 10 that uses the internet has risen from 11.9% to 39.6%.⁷⁵ The governorate of Ramallah and al-Bireh, which Birzeit is a part of, has both the largest percentages of households with computers (63.1%)⁷⁶ and internet access (42.8%)⁷⁷ in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

⁷³ Group Interview Two.

⁷⁴ Access and Use of ICT by Households and Individuals by Year. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/ICT2_E.htm

⁷⁵ Access and Use of ICT by Households and Individuals by Year

⁷⁶ Percentage Distribution of Households by Availability of Computer, Governorate and Type of Locality, 2011. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/ICT_Households_Annual 10_E.htm

⁷⁷ Percentage Distribution of Households with Internet by Governorate and Type of Locality, 2011. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/ICT_Households_Annual 07_E.htm

BZU students and faculty perceive the rise of technology as both a positive and negative development. Professors and administrators highlight the advent of social media as a means connect students and spread awareness of important issues. Dr. Nimer emphasizes the benefits social media provides to activism and various causes. She explains that each generation has their own tools that are available to them and social media is the new tool.⁷⁸

Social media has occupied an important role during the formative years of many BZU students, so they have a slightly different perception and are often more critical of its impact on society. In our first group interview, students suggest technology as the first difference between their generation and that of their parents. The mention of technology sparked a conversation about the consuming effect social media and technology can have on the lives of the youth. One student said “technology took [students’] thoughts.” Many others pointed to the dwindling interest in books and the growing interest in the social aspect of social media. Students do their homework, but they do not always retain the information. However, free time is for Facebook and friends, and not self-betterment.⁷⁹

There is a growing body of literature that examines the role of technology in Arab universities, and in Palestine in particular. BZU built the Ritaj network, similar to Blackboard Collaboration Suite used in some schools in the United States, in 2002 to continue students’ education despite the closure of the university during the second Intifada.⁸⁰ Beyond its intended purpose as an educational tool, Dr. Makram Khoury-Machool illustrates how Ritaj and other

⁷⁸ Interview with Dr. Sonia Nimer

⁷⁹ Group Interview Two.

⁸⁰ Newby, L. (2009). Education, Technology, and Conflict: The Use and Perceptions of the Internet in Palestinian Higher Education. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from http://www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/Education,_Technology_and_Conflict,_Palestine,_Landon_Newby-FINAL_DRAFT.pdf

internet and communications technologies became “e-resistance tools.”⁸¹ Technology is a new tool in the Palestinian repertoire of resistance, and has been widely used since the second Intifada. Palestinian e-resistance, as described by Khoury-Machool, comprises different forms of “hacktivism,” including: mass emails calling for demonstrations and meetings; mass media; petitions; the countering of misrepresentations; online fundraising; and blogs.⁸²

Technology provides easy access to a growing wealth of information and new tools to connect to a variety of different people. Some students mentioned that this is overwhelming. With technology, there is so much information out there that is hard to even know the minimum. The previous generation can point to the benefits of this new technology, but the next generation must effectively make use of it.

Effects of Occupation

Although intra-Palestinian strife is the main cause of student resentment and apathy towards politics, one cannot look at the situation without taking into account the real effects of the Israeli occupation. In fact, the occupation, as it has in the past, is the unifying factor of this diverse student population. The effects of occupation on student life at Birzeit can be seen as a combination of financial restraints, student arrests, and soldier presence on campus.

On the administration side, the university has struggled to maintain its funding from both the PA and international sources. As a result of American and Israeli political and economic boycotts, the conditions of many public and private institutions throughout Palestine have worsened. Palestinian taxes collected by the Israeli government have not reached PA, a traditional source of funding for the university. Official BZU literature states that students pay

⁸¹ Khoury-Machool, M. (2007). Palestinian Youth and Political Activism: The Emerging Internet Culture and New Modes of Resistance. *Policy Futures in Education*, 5(1), 26.

⁸² Khoury-Machool.

fees that amount to 40% of the cost of their education with a small portion coming from the PA.⁸³ Furthermore, the democratic ascension of Hamas to power within the PA, however fractured it may be, has caused a further decline in international funding. Hamas's designation as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States has decreased funding to public institutions throughout the West Bank and Gaza.⁸⁴ As a result, the university has had to turn to other sources of funding including that of Gulf countries. This has had effects on the education itself that BZU provides. In 2012, a small group of Salafi students complained to the university administration about a philosophy professor posting an Emirati political cartoon commenting on social issues and the religious political parties. The bloc ultimately succeeded in the university taking measures against the professor, a move that created widespread debate across campus about the alleged role of Gulf funding and influence on the curriculum. Many were shocked that the most liberal campus in Palestine was allegedly under the influence of conservative, religious forces from outside the country.⁸⁵ The effects of occupation have indeed had their effects on the university as they faced decreased external and internal funding and the quality and reputation of their education may have suffered as a result.

The IDF entering BZU campus repeatedly throughout its existence has also affected university life. It shut down the entire university during the course of the first Intifada and repeatedly interfered until the second Intifada. June 2014 was the first time that the IDF entered the campus since 2002, where it raided primarily on the IB offices. This was due to the kidnapping of three Yeshiva students from a settlement near Hebron several days prior in which

⁸³ Informational Pamphlet.

⁸⁴ Abdul Rahman, M. (2006). Despite the Occupation, Palestinian Students Thrive in Birzeit University. *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 25(9), 58-59.

⁸⁵ Ghosheh, Hussam. "Birzeit University: Silencing Humor." *Alakhbar English*. 19 June 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2015.

the Israeli government enacted ‘Operation Brothers’ Keeper’ to crack down on the Hamas party.⁸⁶

Student arrests a regular feature on BZU campus. One of the most recent incidents is the IDF arrest of Lina Khattab, a first year student in December 2014 for attending the protests at O’far prison. Student arrests are one cause that unites students regardless of political affiliation. Right 2 Education, a student group that advocates against the effects of occupation on education, works to ensure that students in administrative detention receive legal assistance and fight against restrictions on mobility through checkpoints.⁸⁷ Students and professors who are politically active are also susceptible to arrest; all student groups associated with political parties are prohibited under military law.⁸⁸ The charges presented to student prisoners all stem from resisting the occupation, including everything from attending protests to raising a Palestinian flag. One independent student pointed out that these arrests dissuade students from wanting to become politically involved, citing the threat to future employment and job prospects. When weighing the costs of political involvement, a major reason that unaffiliated students choose to stay that way is that the implications of doing so are too high and do not achieve the end goal of a Palestinian state. Over the last two decades, the occupation has slowly begun to wear away the motivation for joining formal means of resistance, forcing students to resort to alternative methods. This causes a further disconnect when groups still choose to adhere to traditional methods; a split in methods often reinforces factional differences and leads to further disunity.

⁸⁶ Deger, A. (2014, June 19). Nighttime Israeli raid on Bir Zeit University yields -- truck full of Hamas flags. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/06/nighttime-israeli-university>

⁸⁷ Right to Education Campaign – Birzeit University.

⁸⁸ Mahmoudi, Y. (2015, March 17). The dismal lives of students locked in Israeli prison. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://mondoweiss.net/2015/03/students-locked-israeli>

Elections

Elections at BZU are hotly contested affairs that draw media attention year after year. They have become particularly important in the last several years because of the lack of elections on a national scale. They are seen as reflections of societal attitudes at large, with many pointing to the 2006 and 2007 IB victories as an indicator of the general change of public opinion away from Fatah and towards Hamas.⁸⁹ The 2015 elections have also incited a media storm that call its victory “overwhelming;” some attribute the victory for the Islamist ideology while others say that it is an indicator of discontent with the ruling Fatah party and the PA.⁹⁰ Based on the interviews we conducted, we agree with the latter: the recent IB victory at BZU should be attributed to the discontent with the ruling Fatah party on the PA level as well as the SYM on the student level. BZU’s role as a liberal university in Palestine and a traditional Fatah stronghold does indicate that this victory is significant. When IB does not participate in the elections, voter turnout is significant lower, as seen in Table 1.4. At the same time, we believe that the results should not be seen as a resurgence of student political activism as voter participation levels remain fairly consistent over the last 10 years when both major parties are competing.

⁸⁹ Interview with Professors from Faculty of Law and Public Administration.

⁹⁰ “ Hamas wins Birzeit University student council election for the first time since 2007,” Haaretz.

Table 1.4: Election Results 2005-2015

| | SYM | IB | PDSP | % Participation |
|-------------|------------|-----------|-------------|------------------------|
| 2005 | 23 | 23 | 5 | 82 |
| 2006 | 18 | 23 | 5 | 81 |
| 2007 | 18 | 26 | 6 | 85 |
| 2008 | 25 | 19 | 5 | 85 |
| 2009 | 24 | 22 | | 84.16 |
| 2010 | | DNC* | | |
| 2011 | 29 | DNC* | 14 | 50 |
| 2012 | 26 | 19 | 5 | 75.4 |
| 2013 | 23 | 20 | 7 | 76 |
| 2014 | 23 | 20 | 7 | 71 |
| 2015 | 19 | 26 | 5 | 77.1 |

*DNC: Did not compete⁹¹

Many students interviewed are dissatisfied with SYM's use of financial incentives around election time. Unaffiliated students and outsiders both commented on the tactics that parties used to garner votes; SYM in particular was cited as one that used incentives such as adding minutes to students' mobiles and other monetary means in the month prior to elections. This statement is supported by the response of the administration's student advisor, who stated that SYM focused more on financial means to garner and provide support for the students on campus. Reports from the 2015 elections echo this trend: members from the Fatah party were allegedly angry with the SYM because of their failure to win despite the resources the party provided.⁹²

⁹¹ The IB did not participate in the elections following the beginning of Fatah rule in 2007.

⁹² "Palestinian MP: Birzeit University Election Could Be the Last in the West Bank." Middle East Monitor. 27 Apr. 2015. Web. 6 May 2015.

Several interviewees noted that there was a significant drop-off between first year participation in elections and the upperclassmen. One former student remarked, “When you go to vote, it is divided by class year. The line for the first-years is very long and they have to wait a very long time. Any upperclassmen can just go in and vote and be done very quickly as there are no lines.”⁹³ One interviewee mentioned that she was “brainwashed” to vote for the SYM her first year. In the 2015 election reports, one Fatah activist claimed that Hamas took “full advantage of last year’s war in the Gaza Strip with Israel to obtain the support of students at the university, especially among freshman.”⁹⁴

This victory should not be seen as a turn to Hamas rule in the West Bank. At BZU, they will still face the challenges of leading the Student Council and dealing with the same disillusionment and levels of inter-party coordination that previously existed. Additionally, they will face the challenges of being under threat by the PA. Just days after the election, the leader of IB at BZU was arrested by the PA with Hamas claiming that he was tortured.⁹⁵ Fatah and the SYM still maintain the advantage then of maintaining outside support as well as well as being able to protest any unpopular actions or criticize inaction by the part of the IB.

That being said, we do not believe this election will fundamentally change how things are run at BZU or in the PA at large. Many of the issues that the students complained about still persist and lie outside the purview of party politics, such as ability to pay tuition and student arrests. The consistently high voter turnout suggests that voting is a low-cost way of democratic participation. Given that only 26.2% of students identify as active in political party activities, a

⁹³ Group Interview Two.

⁹⁴ “Hamas wins Birzeit University student council election for the first time since 2007” Haaretz.

⁹⁵ “Muzzled Democracy.” The Economist. The Economist Newspaper, 29 Apr. 2015. Web. 6 May 2015.

significant portion of the student body participates in university elections without affiliating with a party platform.⁹⁶

The issue lies in the interpretation of the results of this participation: the parties perceive it as legitimate support for its policies while students may primarily vote because it is the only means to express discontent. This channel of voting is perhaps one of the few ways that the institutions of the PA and Palestinian citizens can participate in a democratic exchange. The parties of the PA address immediate financial concerns of the students while trying to garner votes to indicate support and maintain their power. This distortion of the democratic nature of elections is a clear result of the ineffective PA governance, changing economic circumstances, and ongoing effects of the occupation, which pressures students to seek alternative means to express themselves politically.

Alternative Methods of Resistance

Our interviews highlight changing attitudes towards politics and student activism and a new repertoire of resistance. Students feel that the previous generation was more active in translating their thoughts into action. However, it is possible that what we are seeing are thoughts translating into different types of individual activities rather than unified collective action. This is particularly true in regards to resisting the occupation.

Many students mentioned in the interviews that the previous generation had one goal, but no one was able to articulate what that goal was. The creation of an independent Palestine could be assumed, but it was not confirmed. What was clearer was that they perceived that their parents and grandparents were unified in the methods they used to work towards achieving this goal. It is

⁹⁶ “MIFTAH announces the survey results on perceptions of university students, youth, and women political participation.”

possible that it is not the goals but the approaches that are changing. Students still emphasize resistance against occupation with the aim of developing an independent Palestinian state. The ways that they reach this goal and the ways they resist occupation, however, vary significantly.

The diversification of the repertoire of resistance among the Palestinian youth is a result of the growing disillusionment with Palestinian politics and the changing economic climate in the West Bank, particularly in Birzeit and Ramallah. The way students view their situation, both as individuals and within the greater Palestinian context, influences which methods of resistance they find most effective or most appropriate for themselves.

A common theme in the interviews was the connections between resistance, politics, and being Palestinian. One male student asserted that he did not have to be in a political party to be Palestinian.⁹⁷ The other unaffiliated students echoed this sentiment, and they described how they resisted “in their own way.” These personalized forms of resistance vary from student to student. Some students choose to volunteer and serve their community, even beyond the hours required for graduation. Others utilize the power of speech and writing to spread awareness about the occupation and the Palestinian cause.

Many students no longer consider the methods of resistance of student political groups to be effective. One graduate explained that she didn’t go to O’far to resist with the others, because it could prevent her from being able to leave the country and it ultimately achieved nothing – throwing rocks does not deter or hurt the Israeli soldiers and it deprives many of the opportunity to travel or even finish their education.⁹⁸ Some students are even losing faith in the rallies and gatherings organized to commemorate or raise awareness of arrested and martyred students,

⁹⁷ Interview with Independent Male [Personal interview]. (2015, March 19).

⁹⁸ Group Interview Two.

which attract smaller audiences than they used to. Even the IB representatives noted that political rallies, such as activities to support prisoners, are largely ineffective.⁹⁹

The changing attitudes that were discussed in our interviews are the result of relational, environmental, and conceptual mechanisms altering student activism on the BZU campus. The development of ineffective governance on the part of the PA, the domination of the Fatah party, and the polarization of Palestinian politics bleed into the universities and shape the dynamics of the student political scene, particularly the Student Council. The commercialization of Ramallah and the stresses of occupation impact student concerns and priorities. This in turn produces new conceptual frameworks with which students navigate university life. These relational, environmental, and conceptual mechanisms result in a different kind of student activism in which student organizations are ultimately less cohesive. This will have implications for the future character of the student movement.

Conclusion

The current analysis of Palestinian politics tends to focus exclusively on the Fatah-Hamas split and convening a united government. Our research shows that a significant part of the puzzle lies outside of party politics. Perceptions of political activism are changing. Disillusionment with the status quo in the political system, a changing economic climate, and years of occupation have put new actors on the scene. Student elections and university party affiliates will maintain an important role in Palestinian society, but they will not remain the only important figures.

Analysis on student elections provides some gauge of public interest, but this analysis should be expanded to include all students and their motivations and actions to provide a more accurate picture of the relationship between students and politics. Viewing student politics through the

⁹⁹ Interview with IB leaders.

lens of political parties is dangerous because it reinforces the assumption that political parties dominate student activism. There are other important methods by which students engage politically and socially. By expanding this analysis, we can see that the future leadership of Palestine will have to contend with the issues of governing effectively and improving the general economic condition facing its citizens.

Student elections are far from irrelevant, however, and the 2015 victory for the IB reinforces this fact. Although independents stress their lack of faith in elections, they do not deny their importance in society. Student Council elections are the only available arena to compete politically given the infrequency of national elections, and are currently the only platform for a democratic exchange. The accuracy of popular support indicated by election results may be called into question - many students claim they cease to participate in elections after their freshman or sophomore year in university and a vote does not necessarily indicate support for a political ideology. However, the election results continue to be an important indicator of public opinion. Political parties use these elections as a gauge of their relative popularity and support. A Hamas victory in a de facto Fatah, or liberal, university indicates dissatisfaction with the status quo but not necessarily support for a particular political platform.

We continue to emphasize the important role BZU plays in developing future Palestinian leaders. A significant number of political leaders on campus are detained by Israel and removed from the political scene. The increasing disillusionment with Palestinian politics and governance does not mean that BZU has ceased to produce Palestinian leaders. Student attitudes towards politics are changing and so are their repertoires of political activism and resistance. While BZU may be producing the future leaders of the political parties, it may also be producing leaders of alternative forms of resistance. Future Palestinian resistance may be characterized by community

volunteerism as well as an appeal to influence global public opinion in the recognition of an independent Palestinian state and the end of the Israeli occupation.

Other sources also point to the Palestinian prisoners' movement as a source of future leadership. Many of our interviews stressed the importance of prisoners, particularly arrested students, in eliciting unified support among the student body. In fact, a PCPSR poll conducted in March 2015 indicated that Marwan Barghouti, an imprisoned Palestinian leader from the Fatah party, would win a presidential election if held.¹⁰⁰ We acknowledge that movements are being shaped within Israeli prisons, and that they have the advantage of transcending party lines. However, the prisoner's movement deals primarily with one issue - the occupation. It does not deal with the issues of governance and economy that the future Palestinian state, whenever it exists, would deal with. Universities are the primary space preparing students for leadership across a variety of sectors, including business, medicine, and law in addition to politics.

Looking Ahead

BZU students are not optimistic about their near futures. The vast majority said the next five years would look the same or worse, and the SYM student representative predicted another Intifada.¹⁰¹ They have made it clear that the economic circumstances, ineffective government, and Israeli occupation have made life difficult. Although attitudes and behaviors are certainly changing, students still care. In addition to traditional political participation, many seek to make a difference by engaging in their communities and influencing world opinion.

We urge BZU to take advantage of these new actors with different political understandings and approaches by providing them a space to develop. Students should be encouraged to engage in political dialogue outside of the traditional political system and party

¹⁰⁰ "Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No - 55." PCPSR. 8 Apr. 2015. Web. 6 May 2015.

¹⁰¹ Interview with SYM leader.

structure to build a deeper understanding of the needs of Palestinians and create more effective means of addressing them. This dialogue should include both members of the party affiliates and independents to ensure students do not feel ostracized for their beliefs regarding resistance and what it means to be Palestinian. BZU should also make sincere efforts in reforming the election process. To address issues of corruption, BZU should limit the funds that student parties are allowed to use during the election period. We recognize that the parties do provide financial assistance to the students, and this should not be discouraged. However, limiting these funds at this particular time would ensure that election results are seen as a reflection of party platforms rather than financial incentives.

Our research aims to build a more comprehensive understanding of student politics, leadership, and resistance as it exists today in order to begin a conversation about the implications for tomorrow. A less cohesive student movement jeopardizes the future of collective nonviolent action. As Pearlman argues, intra-organizational fragmentation increases the risk of violent methods of resistance. Ineffective governance exacerbates party polarization on campus and therefore the disillusionment with Palestinian politics. We have seen that this leads to a diverse interpretation of resistance and student activism. This diversity offers alternatives while simultaneously hindering the movement cohesion necessary for effective nonviolent action.

Dr. Nimer said that no one can predict Palestine's future, when the next Intifada will be, or what it might look like.¹⁰² We cannot tell you what will happen in the next few years, but we can identify the mechanisms that are shaping the next generation of student activists and subsequently the future of Palestinian politics. We have observed that attitudes towards the traditional party structure are changing, which has led to activism outside of that structure. This

¹⁰² Interview with Dr. Sonia Nimer.

activism expands the conventional repertoire of resistance against the occupation and PA repression in the struggle for a free and independent Palestine.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Bibliography

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Appendix 2: Faculty Questionnaire

1. Can you tell us a little about yourself? What made you decide to work here and when did you start?
2. As a professor or administrator, how do you view student life here at this university?
3. Compared to your life as a university student, how has student life changed?
4. Are politics discussed in the classroom?
5. Are students sanctioned for their political activities?
6. Are your students more or less politically active than in other universities?
7. What do you think are the top 3 challenges facing students at the university?
8. How do you think the students deal with these challenges?
9. Regarding students' responses to these challenges, what seems to be effective or ineffective?

10. What advice would you or do you give your students in regards to the challenges they face?
11. What do you think about student organizations, political or non-political, on campus? Do you think they address the challenges that the students face?
12. Many outside observers suggest that student elections in this area are important to the Palestinian Authority. What do you think about this perception?
13. Are teachers or administrators involved in student elections?
14. If a student is arrested, how do you as a professor react? How does the university react?
15. Is there anything else you think we are missing about student life and student organizations on campuses? Is there anything you would like to add?
16. Do you mind if we directly quote any of your responses?
17. We would like to use the following identifiers for when we publish our work and when referring to your responses: age, gender, school, and occupation. Is there one or more of these that you would not like to be identified by?

Appendix 3: Student Questionnaire

1. Can you tell me about the kinds of activities you are involved in as a student?
2. What made you join the activities or organizations you are a part of?
3. Do you consider yourself politically active? What does being politically active mean to you?
4. How did you become involved politically? If you aren't, how do you think other students have become involved?
5. Why did you choose to become involved with your organization?
6. What are the goals of the groups you are involved in?
7. How do student groups achieve the goals they set for themselves?
8. What impact do student political groups have on:
 - a. university life?
 - b. municipality politics?
 - c. the Palestinian Authority?
9. Many outside observers suggest that student elections in this area are important to the Palestinian Authority? What do you think about this perception?
10. What are the top 3 concerns facing you as a university student?
11. When a concern (referring to the 3 concerns identified earlier) arises on campus, how is it resolved?
12. If something happens relating to the major concerns you've identified, how do you react? How does your organization react?
13. What do you think of different kinds of organized protests?
14. What methods do you think are ineffective in finding solutions to these concerns?
15. What do you think of student groups on other university campuses? Has your group worked with groups or students at other universities? What are the means of communication?
16. Many outside observers suggest that student elections in this area are important to the Palestinian Authority. What do you think about this perception?
17. If a student is arrested, how do they continue their education?
18. What is your major concern in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?
19. What kind of solution are you looking for regarding the conflict?

20. What do you believe will happen in 5 years?
21. Is there a difference between the way your generation thinks and the previous generation?
22. Given the conversation we've had, is there something about this topic that you think we're missing? Is there anything else you'd like to add?
23. Do you mind if we directly quote any of your responses?
24. We would like to use the following identifiers for when we publish our work when referring to your responses: age, gender, school, and class year. Is there one or more of these that you would not like to be identified by?