

Palestine: Education at Gunpoint

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

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I recall the first sentence of my fifth grade essay on “Education and Youth”. Written with the occasional aid of my father, and dotted with clichés, it might have read something like this:

“Youth is the backbone of any nation, and education is essential to arm the youth with the knowledge they need to lead their societies toward change, progress and prosperity.”

The grayish blue pencil I used to write my essay with was one of several items handed annually by United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) staff to refugee children in many schools scattered throughout the Gaza Strip. My Arabic teacher was Abu Kamal al-Hanafi, a wonderful man with a terrible temper, who was also the Imam of the local mosque. My classroom had exactly 62 students. My desk was as old as the Israeli occupation of Gaza, if not older. The roof was filled with holes, creating an exciting spectacle as birds flew in and out, often nesting in available spaces. Watching these scenes made the brutish Arabic grammar lessons bearable, and eased the fear caused by Abu Kamal’s bouts of anger and the occasional Israeli gunfire in and around the refugee camp.

While the introduction to my “Education and Youth” essay was clichéd and I may not have known what many of the terms actually meant, its overriding sentiment remains as true for me now as it ever was.

I remembered my essay as I read about the first World Education Forum (WEF) in Palestine, which took place in several regions throughout historic Palestine, including Jerusalem, Nazareth, Jaffa, Bethlehem and the Gaza Strip. Those who were denied access by Israeli authorities had their own conference in Lebanon. The event, which started on October 28, lasted four days.

The problems faced by the education system in Palestine were difficult enough during my childhood. Now they have compounded to unforeseen levels, with the educational sector divided between two educational ministries in Gaza and the West Bank, the former under Israeli siege and the latter under military occupation. Were it not for UNRWA, the already severe obstacles would have become completely insurmountable long ago. But today even UNRWA is struggling with depleting funds and political haggling between competing Palestinian authorities and an ever atrocious Israeli occupation.

According to statistics provided by the United Nations IRIN news agency and recently cited by IPS, 39,000 children in Gaza had no available school to attend following the recent Israeli war. The United Nations has put the number of schools and kindergartens that were destroyed or severely damaged by the Israeli onslaught during the 2008-2009 war at 280. Considering earlier problems of a barely standing educational infrastructure, malnourished

pupils and devastated family incomes, one can only imagine the impact of the latest blow.

As if the damage caused by Israel was not enough, the Palestinian Authority has also done its fair share of harm.

According to the Palestine Monitor, the head of the Ministry of Education proclaimed in his message to the conference: "Through education we will become a prosperous nation, and will obtain a life that allows us to live in freedom. We are a people who can live and learn despite the problems we encounter. We will continue to improve education, so that future generations can live peacefully."

I can humbly concede that this statement is much more impressive than my fifth grade proclamations. But as well-meaning and accurate as the assessment sounds, one can hardly absolve the Palestinian leadership of its own share of the blame.

Following the clashes between Fatah and Hamas, which lead to the ousting of Fatah from Gaza in 2007, thousands of teachers refused to return to work. They were paid by the West Bank leadership and resuming work under Hamas might have meant the freezing of their salaries by rival Fatah. The Hamas government were left with the formidable task of filling the vacant posts at very short notice. Many schools were also destroyed during the war, and many teachers and students were killed or wounded. Since the families of most students were poorer than ever under a harsh Israeli siege, bringing the educational system in Gaza back to its old status was almost impossible.

Gaza might be the most referenced example, for obvious reasons, but the education debacle in Palestine hardly stops there. With every extra mile added to Israel's already gigantic annexation wall, and with every new military checkpoint, more and more Palestinian students in the West Bank are held back - from school, from opportunities, from a better life.

Palestinians living in third class status in today's Israel, struggling against constant attacks on their identity and history also have numerous challenges to overcome.

On top of the problems created by military occupation, discrimination and political factionalism, other challenges, which also exist in other Middle Eastern societies, such as adult literacy and gender equality, are also very much relevant in Palestine. These too need to be addressed.

The World Education Forum conferences were accurately named "Education for Change." But in order for this change to take place, rival Palestinian factions must not politicize education. If complete unity eludes them at the moment, they should at least unify their ministries of education, even if temporarily, under the auspices of a third Palestinian party.

Needless to say, the Israeli occupation and the siege must end. No healthy educational system can ever be fostered under the boots of soldiers and at gunpoint.

More, regional and international solidarity is essential to help Palestinians achieve a semblance of normalcy in their educational system under the current difficult circumstances.

The good news is that I got a full mark on my Arabic essay on "Education and Youth". Whether the parties involved will ever agree that "education is essential to arm the youth

with the knowledge they need to lead their societies toward change, progress and prosperity” remains to be seen. Personally, I will maintain my fifth grade position. I now understand what it actually means.

Ramzy Baroud (www.ramzybaroud.net) is an internationally-syndicated columnist and the editor of PalestineChronicle.com. His latest book is My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story (Pluto Press, London), now available on Amazon.com.

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