

Israel and the Destruction of the Future of the Palestinians

By Samir Zaqut

Education is one of the gateways to generating human and economic development. The power and strength of states – indeed their very futures – cannot surpass the level of their educational progress. This discussion is not limited to the theoretical realm, and there are many examples to attest to this fact. Nothing is more indicative than the experience of the United States of America itself, which was shocked when the former Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite in 1957. Experts and institutions began to conduct research into the causes of the Soviet ascendancy, and located the source in the American educational system, which was based on dictation rather than on research, analysis and criticism.

Malaysia also provides a further illustration of the importance of education and of the fact that it constitutes a basic starting point for generating progress. Since becoming prime minister of Malaysia in 1981, Mahathir Muhammad, beginning from the starting point of education, initiated a revolution in teaching methods and curricula. As a result, Malaysia experienced growth and has become a significant economic power within the Asian world.

Interest in the right to education is not restricted to states, but also extends to the United Nations itself. The various organs of the UN have developed a greater understanding of the right to education; they have begun to view it as an empowering right that increases opportunities for human beings and raises their standards of living. Furthermore, the realization of the right to education promotes many other rights and affords better opportunities for confronting poverty and violence. Accordingly, the UN has formed a special organ (UNESCO) to address education, in addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The UN Charter also emphasizes the importance of education and calls for greater international cooperation for its development (Article 55b).

The UN has also underlined the importance of education in its various declarations and covenants. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, establishes education as a fundamental right and stipulates that, "Everyone has the right to education, that education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." The UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirms the need to respect the right to education and to make it a protected right according to international law and domestic laws, and obliges states to realize the right to education for their populations. Articles 13-14 of the Covenant specify the components of the right to education. In addition, exploring the full significance of this right, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has listed the components of the right to adequate education and the need to provide education to disabled people, to the elderly, and others. The human rights regime has charged states with the responsibility for implementing these criteria. The State of Israel continues to exercise effective control over most administrative and governmental functions in Gaza, and it therefore bears residual responsibility for essential aspects of the lives of the population, including education, under International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law. This responsibility becomes more apparent the more Israel puts obstacles in place that undermine local bodies' efforts to safeguard and promote human rights.

Therefore Israel – as a state occupying Palestinian lands, including the Gaza Strip – is obliged to respect the right to education and to effect its realization for the Palestinian population under its occupation. In reality, however, the opposite is occurring. Anyone who follows Israeli practices that are aimed against education in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) will understand Israel's lack of compliance in protecting the right to education and will be aware of the various means with which Israel has deliberately damaged the Palestinian educational process.

Since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in the OPT on 28 September 2000, the occupation forces during the course of its military incursions and aerial bombardments have killed hundreds of school children. According to data collected by the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, the occupation forces have killed 770 school children in Gaza alone since the beginning of the Second Intifada, accounting for 30% of the deaths at the hands of the occupation forces in the Gaza Strip. The UN flag flies above schools run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to protect students while they sit in their classrooms in vain; Raghda Adnan Abd al-Muta al-Assar (nine years old), Ghadeer Jaber Hussein Abu Mukhaimar (ten years old), Nawran Iyad Arafat Deeb (eleven years old) have all been killed by the Israeli military. School uniforms did not protect the children either, as Iman Samir Darwish al-Hams (fourteen years old), for example, was killed on her way to school. The occupation forces have also planted explosive devices along the routes taken by children to their schools. On the morning of 22 November 2001, one such device exploded and caused the death of four children from a single family. In addition, 106 educational facilities have been exposed to bombardment, including kindergartens, grade schools, and university buildings, seven of which were completely destroyed, according to data gathered by Al Mezan.

The occupation forces have also prevented school textbooks printed in the West Bank from reaching the Gaza Strip, thereby depriving children of school textbooks for varying periods of time. It has further deliberately prevented university students from the Gaza Strip who study at universities in the West Bank and abroad from reaching their universities.

While these policies have been implemented since the outbreak of the Second Intifada, they have recently escalated in an unprecedented manner, in particular since 14 June 2007, when Israel completely closed off the Gaza Strip and deprived its population of the right to travel and to leave and enter the area.

The occupation forces deliberately prevented around 670 university students from the Gaza Strip from traveling in order to continue their studies in the United States, Europe, Jordan, East Asia and other areas. The Israeli escalation assumed an unprecedented form after 19 September 2007, when the government decided to designate the Gaza Strip a 'hostile entity'. The restrictions imposed on movement to and from the Strip were tightened even further and a travel mechanism that allowed university students to leave the Gaza Strip via the Beit Hanoun (Erez) border crossing towards the al-Ouja border crossing with Egypt was cancelled.

Israel stands united behind the deprivation of the rights of the Palestinians. Thus the issue is not limited to political, military or security-related orders, but also extends to the judicial sphere: the Israeli Supreme Court lent legitimacy to the denial of the rights of Palestinian students to reach their universities outside of the Gaza Strip when it rejected a petition demanding that Palestinian students be allowed to leave the Strip for the purpose of attending their universities (H.C. 11120/05, *Hamdan v. Southern Military Commander*).

In addition to the above, hundreds of school children at various stages of their education remain stuck with their families in the Gaza Strip. Children who visited the Gaza Strip at the beginning of the summer holidays are still being prevented from returning to their schools and therefore risk missing the current academic year of study. They are not registered in schools in Gaza and their parents have refused to register them in the hope that they will be permitted to leave the Strip and return to the countries from which they came.

The above information indicates the extent to which Israel is seeking to absolve itself of its obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, which oblige Israel to respect, and indeed to realize, the right of Palestinians to a suitable education, and not only to refrain from damaging the educational process. In addition, this information raises serious doubts over Israel's real intentions and points to what could be understood as Israel's unflagging efforts to destroy the future of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (and the OPT in general) by perpetuating the economic and political subordination of the Palestinians. Moreover, even if the Palestinians were to achieve independence, they would still not be able to break free of the grip of Israel's jaws; indeed, what else can be understood from the evacuation of Israel's military forces and settlements from the Gaza Strip and Israeli claims that it bears no responsibility for the lives or living standards of the population of Gaza, while at the same time continuing to exercise absolute control over their lives and to target education in the ways described above? Therefore, Israel bears responsibility for the destruction of the future of the Palestinians, as anyone judging the matter objectively will concur.

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