

13 July 2012

**A Call to the Organizers at York St John University of ‘Mediating Peace:
Reconciliation through Art, Music and Film’**

The British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) urges the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at York St John University to cancel its proposed joint conference with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HJU), scheduled to be held in Jerusalem in November 2012, and to end its association until the HJU ends its complicity in Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine and its human rights abuses against the Palestinian people.

The Harry S Truman Research Institute and the Department of East Asian Studies are both integral parts of the HJU. As such, they are deeply implicated in the institutional structures that maintain and uphold the system of colonial control and apartheid over Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territory, over those who are citizens of Israel (1) and which denies Palestinian refugees their internationally recognized right to return to their homes and their lands.

The specific case for a boycott of the HJU

1. Theft of Palestinian land and violations of the International Law including the 4th Geneva Convention

We ask that the staff involved at YSJ consider the symbolism of the venue of this conference. On 1 September 1968, the Israeli authorities illegally confiscated 3345 dunums of Palestinian land (2). Part of this land was then used to build the Mount Scopus campus of the HJU. This land confiscation was clearly illegal since it is part of East Jerusalem, which is an occupied territory according to international law. Israel’s unilateral annexation of occupied East Jerusalem into the State of Israel, and the application of Israeli domestic law to it, are violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and have been repeatedly denounced as null and void by the international community, including by the UN Security Council in its Resolution 252 (21 May 1968). By moving Israelis (staff and students) to work and live on occupied Palestinian land, the Hebrew University is therefore in grave violation of the Fourth Geneva Conventions.

2. Close association of the HJU with the Israeli Military and Security Machine

All Israeli academic institutions, including the HJU, have always maintained very close links to the Israeli army, and have contributed to its development regardless of the

Please reply to: BRICUP, BM BRICUP, London WC1N3XX

email: bricup@bricup.org.uk

www.bricup.org.uk

amount of death and destruction it wreaks upon the Palestinians. The Israeli academy is not only deeply implicated in providing the ideological rationale and “scientific” basis for Israel’s colonial policies, but is also a full partner in maintaining the military and security infrastructure required for the practice of colonialism, occupation and apartheid.

Specifically all military colleges and training facilities, including the military Command and Staff College which trains officers, are under the academic auspices of HUI. The construction of a new military establishment, the National Defence College, has just been announced (3). It will be on the Mount of Olives adjacent to HUI’s Mount Scopus campus, just a few hundred metres from the Old City and the Temple Mount.

In 2009, the highly respected joint Palestinian /Israeli Alternative Information Center (www.alternativenews.org) published a dossier of the complicity of all Israeli academic institutions in the occupation of Palestinian territories (4). The entry for the HUI includes, not only the presence of a military base on HUI’s Givat Ram campus, but also the following:- protocols for aiding army reservist students, special assistance to students who served in the 2008 military attack on the Gaza strip, specific scholarships for veterans of *Operation Defensive Shield* (which included the destruction of Jenin refugee camp) and partnership and host of the Talpiot academic reserve programme, which trains soldiers in sciences. The dossier also refers to the fact that Carmi Gilon, the HUI’s Vice-President for External Affairs, is past Director of the General Security Services, an organization especially notorious for torture and human rights abuses of Palestinians. He stands accused of committing war crimes by a number of organizations.

The Call for an academic boycott from Palestinian civil society

In 2004, inspired by the effective cultural boycott of apartheid South Africa, The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), supported by key Palestinian civil society organizations, issued a call for the academic and cultural boycott of all institutions involved in Israel’s system of occupation, colonialism and apartheid (5).

The boycott movement adopts a nonviolent, morally consistent strategy to hold Israel accountable to the same human rights and international law standards as other nations. It asks the international academic community to heed the boycott call, as it did in the struggle against South African apartheid, until “Israel withdraws from all the lands occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem; removes all its colonies in those lands; agrees to United Nations resolutions relevant to the restitution of Palestinian refugees rights; and dismantles its system of apartheid” (6)

Since the international community continues to turn a blind eye to Israel’s colonial and oppressive policies, we believe that the only way open to achieving justice and upholding international law is through sustained pressure on Israel from Palestinian and international civil society.

The question of academic freedom

The UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights defines academic freedom to include the liberty of individuals to freely express opinions about the institution or system in which they work, to fulfil their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the state or any other actor, to participate in professional or representative academic bodies, and to enjoy all the internationally recognized human rights applicable to other individuals in the same jurisdiction. However, the enjoyment of academic freedom carries obligations with it, such as the duty to respect the academic freedom of others, to ensure the fair discussion of contrary views, and to treat all without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds. (7).

We are, of course, keenly aware of the importance of the academic freedom of the individual, but also recognize that such freedoms should not extend automatically to institutions. It is incumbent on academics to develop a nuanced understanding of academic freedom if we are to work effectively alongside the oppressed in their struggles.

The Israeli academy is not the bastion of dissent and liberalism it is purported to be by those who seek to defend Israel by delegitimizing the call for academic boycott. The vast majority of the Israeli academic community is oblivious to the oppression of the Palestinian people--both inside Israel and in the occupied territory--and has never fought to oppose the practices and policies of their state. In fact, they duly serve in the reserve forces of the occupation army and as such are either perpetrators of or silent witnesses to the daily brutality of the occupation. They also do not hesitate to partner in their academic research with the security-military establishment that is the chief architect and executor of the occupation and other forms of oppression of the Palestinian people. A petition drafted by four Israeli academics merely calling on the Israeli government “to allow [Palestinian] students and lecturers free access to all the campuses in the [occupied] Territories, and to allow lecturers and students who hold foreign passports to teach and study without being threatened with withdrawal of residence visas,” was endorsed by only 407 out of 9,000 Israeli academics – **less than 5%** of those who were invited to sign it. (8)

Implications of your engagement with the HUI

As with the academic boycott during apartheid in South Africa, we believe that participation in academic conferences or similar events in Israel, regardless of the intentions of the participants, can only contribute to the prolongation of this injustice by normalizing, and thereby legitimizing, the status quo of occupation and apartheid. We ask you to consider if you would have participated in such a conference, had it been taking place in a South African university during apartheid.

Participation in this conference will unwittingly make the YSJ a participant of the ‘Brand Israel Campaign’ – Israel’s attempt to re-brand its global image through an intense campaign of ‘hasbara’ (propaganda), portraying Israel as a centre of academic and cultural excellence and as a civilized democracy - thereby diverting attention away from its most pernicious form of colonial control and legalized racial discrimination. The

frequent inclusion of Palestinian academics in events like these, either inadvertently or intentionally, contributes to Israel's normalisation agenda, causing damage which far surpasses any academic benefit that may be achieved.

The declared objectives of the Harry S Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace and the focus of the conference ('assisting people to actively engage in the process of reconciliation and peace') rings terribly false when set against the true nature of the host institution which, by its relationship with Israel's occupation forces, demonstrates a total lack of concern for the genuine pursuit of peace.

It is impossible to believe, therefore, that any academic discourse in this setting can have any positive effect to offset the damage it undoubtedly will do. YSJ has an admirable record of concern and action on human right issues in general, and in relation to the suffering of the Palestinians in particular. Since the international community continues to turn a blind eye to Israel's colonial and oppressive policies, we believe that the only avenue open to achieving justice and upholding international law is through sustained pressure on Israel from Palestinian and international civil society. We ask you to join us in that endeavour.

Until Israel fully abides by international law, we sincerely hope that international academics will not participate in endorsing Israel's violations of international law and the basic human rights of Palestinians – even if inadvertently – and that they will treat Israel exactly as most of the world treated racist South Africa – as a pariah state. Only then can Palestinians hope for a just peace based on international law and, more crucially, on the fundamental principle of equality for all, irrespective of ethnicity, religion or any other identifying factors.

Notes and references

(1) The Russell Tribunal on Palestine in its South Africa session in November 2011 concluded that:

The Tribunal finds that Israel subjects the Palestinian people to an institutionalised regime of domination amounting to apartheid as defined under international law. This discriminatory regime manifests in varying intensity and forms against different categories of Palestinians depending on their location. The Palestinians living under colonial military rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territory are subject to a particularly aggravated form of apartheid. Palestinian citizens of Israel, while entitled to vote, are not part of the Jewish nation as defined by Israeli law and are therefore excluded from the benefits of Jewish nationality and subject to systematic discrimination across the broad spectrum of recognised human rights. Irrespective of such differences, the Tribunal concludes that Israel's rule over the Palestinian people, wherever they reside, collectively amounts to a single integrated regime of apartheid.

<http://www.russelltribunalonpalestine.com/en/sessions/south-africa/south-africa-session-%E2%80%94full-findings/cape-town-session-summary-of-findings>

(2) The decision was published in the official Israeli Gazette - the Hebrew edition-number 1425. It was therefore "legalized" by Israel. This land, for the most part, was (still is) privately owned by Palestinians living in that area. A large part of the confiscated land was then given to the Hebrew University to expand its campus (mainly its dormitories). The Palestinian landowners refused to leave their lands and homes arguing that the confiscation order of 1968 was illegal. Consequently, the case was taken to the Jerusalem District Court in 1972 (file no. 1531/72). In 1973, as expected, the Israeli court ruled in favour of the University and the state. The court decided that the Palestinian families must evacuate their homes and be offered alternative housing.

(3) The Jerusalem Post, July 2nd 2012 .
<http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=276002>

(4) Keller, U. (2009) the Academic Boycott of Israel and the Complicity of Israeli Academic Institutions in Occupation of Palestinian Territories. The Economy of the Occupation: A Socioeconomic Bulletin: Alternative Information Centre.

(5) <http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=869>

(6) Ibid

(7) UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, "The Right to Education (Art.13)," December 8, 1999,
[http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/ae1a0b126d068e868025683c003c8b3b?OpenDocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/ae1a0b126d068e868025683c003c8b3b?OpenDocument)

(8) <http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=792>