

# Whither Bir Zeit University?

**Anton Sabella**

*Birzeit University, Palestine*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*Since its founding under the Israeli occupation, Bir Zeit University has been the catalyst for educating the Palestinian ‘generations of occupation’. Its mission was to empower those who were bereft of their basic human rights and to reclaim and develop the Palestinian national identity by resisting the stultification of Palestinian youth. Following the Oslo Accords, Bir Zeit University has experienced several important developments, namely exponential growth in enrolment, unnecessary programmatic expansion, introduction of super-size classes, and irresponsible staffing decisions. Against this background and a growing financial crisis, this case study examined how managerialism has succeeded in subduing Bir Zeit University to its syllabus, specifically how cultural and structural changes have led to compromising the work conditions and relationships of faculty members. Hence, this case study bids the question—Whither Bir Zeit University?—to those who care to question the present state of affairs as well as anyone ready to search for answers.*

## **INSPIRATION AMIDST ADVERSITY**

The flag of Bir Zeit University, the oldest institution of higher education in occupied Palestine, features the evergreen olive tree on white background, between two pairs of horizontal red and black stripes. While the colors are inspired by those of the flag of Palestine, the adoption of the olive tree as the university emblem is an ever present tribute to the town in which Bir Zeit University was founded, Bir Zeit (Bīr Zyt) – Arabic for ‘well of [olive] oil’. The flag of Bir Zeit University epitomizes an historic event in the lives of Palestinians, both inside Palestine and in diaspora: the

founding of the first national higher education institution (HEI) under the purview of the Israeli settler–colonial regime. Bir Zeit University writes its own tale at a time of crisis in Palestinians' lives, its tale and that of the Palestinian people are linked together by fate and by the all-consuming terrors of the Israeli occupation. It is well established that the founding of Bir Zeit University constitutes an act of redress to enliven the struggle against the occupation, and an unyielding determination to resist the brutality of the Israeli occupation and its mentally stultifying effects on a ravished homeland (<http://www.birzeit.edu/>). The depiction of the olive tree with Bir Zeit University goes well beyond ecology; it draws multiple, positive symbolic signifiers, i.e. resilience, tradition, enlightenment and peace; it describes the most uncommon, colossal mission any contemporary university would want to have. In this context, the tale of Bir Zeit University is a tale of hope, it is a tale of courage embodied as a stronghold within which sustenance and preservation of the Palestinian cultural enlightenment and educational enterprise could continue.

Following the 1967 war (also known, symbolically, as *An-Naksah*, meaning 'the setback') and the ensuing crisis that befell the already violated and bereft people of Palestine, what was left of historical Palestine came under the tyranny of the Israeli occupation, promising further servitude, torture and humiliation to the indigenous Palestinians. Henceforth, ethnic cleansing, imprisonment, land confiscations and death have prevailed. Moreover, to maintain the occupation's strong grip, strict restrictions were enforced on the movement of Palestinians between cities and abroad. Palestinian students were among the most affected by these restrictions. Palestinian students' only access to university education – existing primarily in neighboring countries (e.g., Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq), as there were no institutions of higher education in Palestine before 1967– became fraught with uncertainty and danger (Baramki, 1987). In spite of the harsh reality that assailed Palestinians, it did not deter their will to fight back, to defend their humanity and to dream of a future when the shackles of the occupation will be shattered. The legacy of a few visionary patriots saw this culminating in the ever more pressing need to establish a Palestinian institution of higher education capable of embodying the people's desire for liberation and enlightenment (al-Shaikh, 2015), and assisting in cultivating the soil of a strong-willed Palestinian society and identity.

By the year 1972, Bir Zeit, formerly a two-year college, had blossomed into a full-fledged university with two colleges, arts and sciences. What had begun in the town of Bir Zeit in 1924 as a school for girls carried within itself the seed of a great educational and social movement, growing into a leading institution of higher education in the nation's journey of enlightenment (<http://www.birzeit.edu/>). The transformation into a full-fledged university happened in response to two prevailing circumstances: the evolving needs of the community for post-secondary education, caught up as it was in the socio-political and economic turmoil that swept through the

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