

Mann, Tesfalidet, Kaplan-Lyman and Salahi: A fundamental struggle in Gaza

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In an affront to students everywhere, Berlanty Azzam, a 21-year-old Business major at Bethlehem University from Gaza, was stopped on Wednesday at a checkpoint in the West Bank, on her way back from a job interview in Ramallah. Azzam was detained, blindfolded and driven against her will to Gaza by the Israeli military, even though she had been promised that she would not be forced to return before her petition to the Israeli Supreme Court could be heard. She was only two months away from earning her degree.

According to human rights reports, Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement, including those that forcibly remove students pursuing college degrees, have created a humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly the Gaza Strip. Last December, before Israel's war, Amnesty International said that Gaza had been "reduced to bare survival" as a result of Israel's ongoing siege of the territory. Yet despite increasingly drastic conditions in Gaza, American interventions in this situation have often been anecdotal. An almost comical example is the recent phone call to the Israeli administration made by Senator John Kerry '66, D-Mass., on behalf of pasta which, in addition to countless other goods, had been banned from entering Gaza. Thanks to Kerry, pasta is now allowed but the siege persists, and if yesterday's issue was pasta, today's concerns the other fundamentals of daily life.

When we ask why Azzam and hundreds of students in Gaza should be deprived of their education, we are really asking why it was ever appropriate for Israel to isolate Gaza's civilian population from the world in the first place.

Azzam's story has been widely covered by international news sources and has garnered a lot of political attention. Even if Israel succumbs to pressure and allows her to return and resume her studies in the West Bank, we need to make sure that her story does not become to the right to education, what pasta was to the right to food. Human rights interventions should not be limited to ad-hoc phone calls. Just like protecting access to health and water, guaranteeing access to food and education for the millions of civilians of Gaza must be a fundamental policy goal.

There is no doubt Israel's control over life in Gaza and the West Bank has had a deleterious impact on education. In 2000, over 300 Palestinians from Gaza were enrolled at Birzeit University in the West Bank; today there are none. According to the Israeli group Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, over 800 Palestinian students are currently unable to leave Gaza to pursue an education abroad.

Palestinian students in the West Bank face similar obstacles. Birzeit University's Right To Education Campaign reports that students routinely face checkpoint delays of one to two hours while commuting to school. Among students at An-Najah University who regularly cross checkpoints in their commute, over 91 percent interviewed revealed they had missed classes due to delays, and 64 percent reported being physically abused at a checkpoint.

The right to education and other fundamental human rights must be taken into consideration when we discuss our collective engagement with Israel, whether at a government or academic level. Moreover, they must play a commanding role. If the Obama administration's regional

initiatives do not even see the imperative in removing the basic barriers impede proper education or access to food, it is difficult to see how they can adequately tackle more difficult issues. Basic rights are not issues to be debated in bilateral negotiations: they set a low bar that should be met as a precondition for any form of normalized engagement with the Israeli government.

As students at Yale Law School, we especially empathize with Azzam as she pursues her education. Recently, former Israeli Prime Minister Tzipi Livni was honored by Yale as she delivered her Chubb Fellowship speech in the Law School. The acclamation of an Israeli leader that pursued a policy of “dieting” Palestinians into submission gives us pause to reflect on our relationship with Israeli public figures and the standards to which we hold them — and ourselves.

For Palestinians, and particularly for Gazans, barriers to seeking an education, let alone to a dignified life, are a structural facet of Israeli control. When basic human rights are violated anywhere, it is our duty to conduct ourselves responsibly as institutions and as individuals. The imperatives of politics — or academic freedom — do not require veneration of those responsible for flouting the fundamental standards to which we hold ourselves.

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