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MuwatIn Institute for Democracy and Human Rights

Muwatin 22nd Annual Conference

“The Complex Challenges facing Palestinian Universities: Is there a Way Out?”

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Muwatin 22nd Annual Conference will focus on specific aspects related to Palestinian universities that have not been subject of any constructive public debate for years. Even analysis and critical studies on these issues focused often on sporadic details without any holistic approach to derive findings and conclusions susceptible of guiding universities and their institutional decision-making.

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The starting point to assess the situation in Palestinian universities would be to say or argue that most of them suffer an identity crisis, which is not limited to the process of production of knowledge under a colonial circumstance. Universities seek, on the one hand, to produce research while, on the other, they focus on the quality of education and of their graduates. However, they are not capable of combining both goals on the ground so as to excel in any of these areas, or in both of them, and distinguish themselves from Arab universities. Such distinction is an even more difficult goal, not to mention the international rating.

This identity crisis appears at multiple dimensions. One can say that excellence requires financial resources, which most Palestinian universities lack. More explicitly, it says that poverty and education/ science do not co-exist. However, experience in higher education in rich Arab countries, has clearly shown that wealth may be necessary, but does not suffice to excel. Speaking of whether the Palestinian universities possess the other conditions of excellence, many experts, knowledgeable of the situation of higher education in Palestine, believe that many of such conditions actually exist. However, the identity crisis conceals vision and blinds both sight and insight, pushing universities into uninformed trends without any clear or justified institutional priorities. Challenges obviously exacerbate under the colonial circumstances, which throw a heavy burden upon higher education in Palestine.

The perquisites of excellence include the quantity, quality, and diversification of academic staff and the specialization backgrounds of faculty members and their models of learning. Excellence also depends on the empirical values they absorb and their dedication to the study in its different stages. Moreover, balance needs to be stricken between teaching hours' load and the time devoted to research. Resources, labs, equipment and decent living must be provided to researchers to enable them focus with a clear mind on their research so that they are saved the burden of locating other opportunities to raise revenue and compensate for current and unstable financial instability. All these conditions are lacking in Palestinian universities in spite of serious attempts to mitigate them.

As regards excellence in education and graduates, Palestinian universities suffer at two levels; on the one hand, they receive secondary education graduates who do not possess analytical or critical thinking skills. This lacuna is a major hindrance to excellence in university education. On the other hand, students who enroll in Palestinian universities lack the necessary scientific and applied sciences backgrounds. Thus far, there has not been any systematic rigorous effort to overcome these obstacles because of the cost entailed or as priorities have not been set when the conscience is preoccupied with the identity crisis.

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Muwatin's 22nd Annual Conference will initiate debate on the detailed issues ensued of the identity crisis syndrome in the Palestinian universities. It aims to conceptualize and identify community priorities feasible under existing resources available to the universities. For this purpose, the conference will be organized into three pertinent sessions to shed light on the several aspects of this theme since they all play a key role in identifying the role and level of higher education in Palestine.

A. Higher Education Crisis in the Arab World: Many reports and studies have addressed the crisis of higher education in the Arab world over the past ten years. These studies covered issues related to the level of universities in general, quality of their graduates, international rating of universities based on specific indicators in addition to high unemployment rates among graduates and the need to find work opportunities for them. Palestine shares the same issues as Arab universities, mainly the poorer ones notwithstanding its unique situation, as is the case for every Arab state taken separately. Thus, discussing the situation in Arab countries for comparison and identification of similarities and differences could be a starting point to tackle this issue.

Some of the questions that arise here include topics that will be addressed in specific papers. They include: what are the common elements across Arab countries that hinder development of universities? Are there solutions or attempts that have succeeded and can be used as models to follow? Has the higher education system in the Arab world been hit by the global neoliberal transformations and their calls to cut down on state expenses on higher education and scientific research? Do some of the obstacles include the manner in which universities are managed and the criteria of administrative recruitment, or tight bureaucracy, or are all these associated to the type of political regimes in the Arab states? Is all of this associated to the neoliberal transformation of university governance and neoliberal impact on the relationship between universities and political powers? In the Palestinian case, in addition to the afore-stated considerations, does the lack of sufficient legal protection of universities allow for interference in recruitment or admission of unqualified students, or the inability to dismiss students who enjoy relations with the centers of power outside the university campus, and which affect the standard of work within universities? Are private interests in Palestine launching a ferocious war against universities? Or is it that education and scientific research are not necessarily supposed to serve the public interest?

B. Unemployment and the Labor Market: While Palestine, like other Arab states, suffer a high unemployment rate, the Palestinian case is still unique for obvious reasons. The aspired economic development, which would create job opportunities for graduates, is actually restrained by the occupation measures or, in some cases, by donors' restrictions. Still, some questions need to be raised: does the number of Palestinian universities and their graduates every year bypass the need? How can the labor market capacity be identified? Has the "market" in the West Bank and Gaza Strip been the sole employer throughout past decades? What is the labor market's absorption capacity in terms of specific skills and knowledge? Have sufficient studies been carried out on such needs and why they change? Is higher education's only goal is to fulfill demand in the labor market? Are there other societal needs of the same importance? Is high schools' graduates rush to enroll in universities in the Palestinian case a reflection of another crisis, including the lack of sufficient applied vocational institutes like polytechnic institutes and the like to equip graduates with the skills to handle the accelerated technological skills needed for the market? Is the sharp shrinking of job opportunities inside the 1948 areas the reason behind masked unemployment in Palestinian universities, as high school graduates "flee" into universities to delay unemployment for four or five years? Why do some people believe that universities must absorb high school graduates even if this comes at the expense of quality? Is the role of universities to contribute to the "stabilization" of the political situation under occupation and delaying unemployment for four or five years, after which the occupation will be blamed? Does reliance on foreign funding and development based on international organizations' recipes co-opt education to end the historical role universities played in the fight for liberation?

C. Research or Teaching Establishments: In their battle to secure a place among other “internationally rated” universities, rarely do Palestinian and even Arab universities ask themselves about the criteria applicable to this competition, which mainly depends on publication and ensuing detailed standards like the number of quotations or references to other published research. Most of these criteria rely on publication in English, which, on the one hand, reflects the globalization of the English language nowadays, but which, on the other hand, reflects the hegemony of discriminatory criteria vis-à-vis publication in other languages, including Arabic. Palestinian universities have opted for several ways to deal with the publication “syndrome”, including publishing as much as possible in English, especially in natural sciences and technology whose terminology is mostly taught in English. Consequently, it is “natural” for some to publish in English in these fields. The other way is to fulfill the requirements and return of “this syndrome” upon faculty members in terms of promotion and advancement. As such, universities publish on their own in specialized journals in Arabic, mainly for purposes of promotion so that they can publish in such journals and other specialized Arabic journals. Most of these journals specialize in social and humanitarian sciences.

The problem of Palestinian universities does not lie in publishing or not publishing. Conducting and publishing research is indeed a welcomed necessity and fits in the core of missions of faculty members, in addition to teaching and community service. The core issue lies in the following questions: is it true that researchers in Palestinian universities have the duty to enrich “humanitarian” knowledge in the world, in its east and west, in spite of immediate Palestinian and Arab local developmental needs and scarce resources? The question rises here about priorities and the role of university administrations in devising indicators of their priorities without any rigid and exaggerated restriction. Focusing extravagantly, as is the case at times, on publishing in English of research that does not necessarily relate to local or Arab needs or preferring this to publishing in Arabic has no clear justification. It only reflects a “narcissi” need for visibility without any vision relating to the position and role of these universities. The **broader question** will then become: what is the role that research and publication play in Palestinian universities and do they stem from specific orientations? Or what is the type of production of knowledge in universities? Is the university an organic component of the society? Are its teachers and graduates considered as organic intellectuals?

Focusing on education and the quality of graduates raises many claims, but most university staff are aware that the majority of students face non-negligible difficulties, mainly as regards to the falsely called “writing skills”. Indeed these skills are intellectual skills that are reflected in writing on paper or on a monitor at present. We are not speaking here of proper spelling and grammar, although important, but rather of analytical skills, coherence, ordered thinking and thinking “outside the box” as well as innovation. MA programs in Palestinian universities are filled with graduates of different local universities, most of whom lack such vital skills needed for the labor market. Questions come raining: why don’t universities dedicate sufficient attention to these aspects? What can be done to fix what has not been fixed in secondary education since this is necessary and expected? Can’t universities exert pressure on the schooling system since they are the major recipients of school graduates? Furthermore, with diversified community pressure upon universities to admit larger number of these graduates, shouldn’t universities have the right to set their terms relating to contents and teaching methods to help schools so that universities can respond to such pressures? Why universities, apparently, do not think it is their role and is it enough to blame it on schools and evade any responsibility?