

Young East Jerusalemites in Israeli Academia: A situation reports in times of war

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July 24, 2024

| Background

A special meeting of the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research's East Jerusalem Forum was held on April 17, 2024. The meeting was conducted in partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, and included approximately 75 participants.

The objective of this meeting was to highlight a significant trend—the increasing enrollment of young East Jerusalemites in Israeli higher education institutions in recent years and their continuation of studies even during the war. The meeting was held in three parts:

Firstly, Dr. Amnon Ramon provided an insightful historical overview to set the stage for the discussions.

Secondly, JIPR researcher Dganit Levi presented her latest publication, "First Generation to Higher Education in Israel: Integration Processes of Young East Jerusalemites in Israeli Academia," highlighting its key findings.

Lastly, there was an open discussion about the war's impact on higher education institutions in Jerusalem.

| Historical Context

Studying at universities in neighboring Arab countries was a long-standing tradition among young people from the middle and upper classes in East Jerusalem, both before 1967 and after the Six-Day War. As the first universities were established in the West Bank during the 1970s and 1980s, the Israeli government actively encouraged East Jerusalem youth to pursue their studies there or continue their tradition of studying abroad rather than in Israeli institutions. This policy stemmed from concerns about integrating East Jerusalem's educated youth into the Israeli system and workforce.

However, a significant shift began around 2014-2015, when initiatives were introduced to transition East Jerusalem schools to an Israeli curriculum and encourage enrollment in Israeli higher education institutions, particularly at the Hebrew University. This shift was supported by subsidized pre-academic preparatory programs specifically designed for young East Jerusalemites and extended to other institutions in Jerusalem, including Hadassah Academic College, Azrieli College of Engineering, David Yellin College of Education, and Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design.

| "First Generation to Higher Education in Israel: Integration Processes of Young East Jerusalemites in Israeli Academia"

Dganit Levi's research presentation shed light on the early stages of integrating young Arab men and women from East Jerusalem into the Israeli higher education system. This represents a significant milestone for many of these students, as they are the first in their families to pursue higher education in Israel.

Key findings from the research include:

- **Demographics:** Most East Jerusalem students in Israeli academia are women (70%), with men comprising 30%.
- **Parental Education:** 54% of these students are first-generation students, with neither parent having an academic background, compared to 20% among Israeli Arabs in the same age group.
- **Motivations:** The primary factors influencing their choice of institution were the desire to study at an Israeli academic institution (53%) and the academic and professional prestige of the institution (52%). Other considerations included proximity to home, recommendations, and scholarship availability.
- **Advantages:** Key advantages of studying in Israel noted by respondents included ease of integration into the Israeli workforce (65%), improvement in Hebrew language skills (58%), scholarship opportunities (51%), and high academic standards (51%).
- **Challenges:** The research identified several barriers, including insufficient counseling and guidance, inadequate Hebrew proficiency, low psychometric exam scores, difficulty gaining admission to desired fields of study, feelings of loneliness and lack of belonging, financial problems, and physical accessibility challenges.

| Response of Higher Education Institutions to the War's Impact

The last part of the meeting featured an open discussion about the war's impact on higher education institutions in Jerusalem. Participants highlighted the lack of interaction between Jewish and Arab students, noting that academia might be among the few spaces where meaningful dialogue and relationship-building could occur.

The discussions underscored the significant challenges facing higher education in these tense times and expressed a commitment to continue monitoring and researching this evolving and crucial area.

- **War's Impact on Campus Atmosphere:** Institutions faced significant challenges in maintaining a peaceful academic environment amid the war, with efforts focused on preventing campuses from becoming sites of conflict.
- **Student Concerns:** Arab students, particularly from East Jerusalem, expressed fears about safety and belonging, while Jewish students were preoccupied with the war's impact on their families.
- **Institutional Preparations:** Universities delayed the start of the semester and conducted workshops to prepare staff and students for the tense atmosphere.
- **Integration Challenges:** The difficulties in integrating East Jerusalem Arab students into the Israeli academic system, exacerbated by the conflict, were acknowledged.
- **Underlying Tensions:** The "quiet" on campuses was seen as potentially masking underlying tensions, with concerns that it might not reflect appropriate security or freedom of expression for Arab students.
- **Future Uncertainty:** There is concern about maintaining this fragile campus peace and the potential challenges that may arise once the war concludes.

Dr. Amnon Ramon's Closing remark

In the current educational system, there is almost no interaction or connection between Jewish and Arab students. Higher education is perhaps the only domain where there is an opportunity for encounters, relationship-building, and dialogue between Jewish and Arab students (including those from East Jerusalem) within Israeli society. Therefore, this challenge is immense and crucial, especially during these difficult and tense times. We intend to continue monitoring and researching this fascinating field in future studies and meetings.