

From the U.S. Mexican Border to Palestine: A Call to Critical Literacy and Action

By Shelley Wong, George Mason University

I was excited and honored when the Editor of Scholars Speak Out, Kate Batson, invited me to contribute to this column. For the past year, I have been a visiting Fulbright scholar from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia to Birzeit University in the West Bank, the occupied Palestinian territories. Birzeit University is a leading university in Palestine and the Middle East. It is rated within the top 2.7 universities internationally by QS World Universities Ranking (<https://www.birzeit.edu/>).

In the year before I arrived in Palestine from the U.S., Israeli authorities denied—or significantly delayed—issuing visas to fifteen of the Birzeit University faculty with foreign passports (Kundara, 2018). When a visa is denied, it means that a professor—no matter how worthy their past contributions nor how innovative their new research projects—can no longer stay and must pack up and leave. Similarly, when the processing of a professor's visa is significantly delayed, it can create undue anxiety. Not knowing if you will be granted a visa to complete the academic year makes it difficult to plan and creates uncertainty, not only for yourself as the individual faculty member and your family—but also your students and the department.

All fifteen Birzeit faculty who were affected were full-time, including leading senior researchers and department chairs. For a world-class research institution such as Birzeit University, the loss of senior international faculty is a terrible loss. Twenty-first century research universities need the synergy of interdisciplinary international exchange in every field of endeavor whether in Education, the Social Sciences, the Arts and Humanities, or Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Denying international faculty the right to conduct research and teach has a slow and steady stranglehold effect on scholarly productivity, exchange of diverse perspectives, and academic freedom.

From Palestine to the United States: Dilemmas of Family Separation

The situation of international faculty, international students and mixed nationality couples and families in Palestine is reminiscent of the plight of over 11 million undocumented youth and family members in the United States (Khalil & Rodriguez, 2017). As a university professor in the U.S. who prepares teachers for PreK-12 licensure in the state of Virginia, I have heard from students and witnessed myself the devastating effects of white supremacist, anti-Semitic, misogynist, anti-Muslim and anti-foreign hate speech and violence directed against school aged children and university students alike in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Particularly vulnerable are students who have intersecting marginal identities such as undocumented LGBTQ students who may be questioning their sexual identity and may be experiencing “double exile” (Ríos Vega & Franeta, 2018).

Teachers and literacy educators may be the first adults outside of their immediate family who undocumented children and youth trust enough to turn to when they need help. In order to attend to the needs of our students, it is important to learn about their realities, and to seek information and resources in order to become better advocates (Wong & Crewalk, 2018). We need to seek allies as we work within our own institutional contexts—whether preK-12, adult school or university—to reach out to the many communities under attack and to counter the dominant stereotypes and misinformation concerning undocumented students and their families (Chomsky, 2007, 2014).

In Palestine and in the U.S., the problem of separation of families is particularly acute for mixed-status families. In a mixed-status family, members of the same family hold different passports or have different identity papers. Since Trump’s Muslim ban and ending of Temporary Protective Status for Haitians and others, growing numbers of students and colleagues in the U.S. have had to face similar dilemmas. If they travel to another country to visit a sick or aging family member, they may face the possibility of not being able to return to their homes in the U.S.

Two of the senior faculty who were forced to leave Palestine last summer were American citizens: Roger Heacock, a distinguished professor

of European history who had founded Birzeit's Institute of International Studies and Laura Wick, a midwife and health researcher. They had taught at Birzeit University since 1983. The Kafkaesque maze of applying for work permits from the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and subsequently from the Israeli Interior Ministry, which ultimately issues the visa, leaves faculty and foreign nationals with Palestinian spouses with conflicting information and uncertain futures (Shehada, 2018).

The lack of freedom for professors from the U.S. and other countries to work at Palestinian institutions contrasts sharply to the ease with which permission is granted to professors to conduct research or teach at Israeli universities. In the recent period, the Israeli rate of renewal of visas for the occupied Palestinian territories has dropped from 70 to 10 percent according to the Palestinian civil affairs commission (Kundera, 2018). The power to issue visas for the occupied West Bank is in the hands of the Israeli government, as the Palestinian Authority has no power to issue visas, as it does not control its own borders.

Many of the faculty affected by the Israeli government's refusal to renew visas are of Palestinian heritage, but lack documentation as permanent residents. Others who are affected are spouses of Palestinians who seek permanent residence status to live in Palestine. There are an estimated 35,000 foreign nationals who have applied to Israeli authorities for family unification (Zabaneh, 2018). Many have waited for years, and in the meantime have to leave and re-enter Palestine, through Israeli controlled immigration authorities every three months, each time getting a B1 visitor visa. Ironically, the same basis for granting a work permit, which is required by the Israeli authorities to obtain a visa, may also be the reason for denying a visa. I met a Palestinian American professor who after retiring from a university in New York, took on a position at a university in Palestine. But after both he and his spouse had taught a number of years in a Palestinian university, and after building their retirement home in Palestine, his spouse was denied entry at the Tel Aviv airport. No reason was offered by the Israeli immigration authorities. The couple is now looking to settle in Europe or the U.S.

International Students Denied Visas

During the year, I watched as my classmates in the Birzeit Palestinian Arabic Studies Program were denied visas to re-enter and complete their studies. A German student, who had studied Modern Standard Arabic, come to Palestine hoping to learn Palestinian Colloquial Arabic. Accompanied by her spouse and child, the family was only given a one-month visa and when she and her family left in the hopes of re-entering to continue her studies was denied entry. Another student from Japan considered herself fortunate when she was able to re-enter and was issued her second three-month visa. After the winter break she was able to begin a second semester of Arabic language studies. However, at the end of the second three-month visa, when she again left, she was not as lucky. Upon returning to the port of entry, Israeli authorities gave her only one week to pack up her bags and go. As it was the middle of the second semester, she had to make special arrangements with Birzeit faculty to complete the semester through correspondence.

The Israeli restrictions on travel may also prevent Palestinian faculty and other professionals—especially those in Gaza—from leaving Palestinian territories. After receiving the good news that a paper has been accepted for an important conference or after receiving an invitation to speak at a prestigious university in one's field, Palestinian faculty in Gaza take a risk. If they leave their families for a conference in the U.S., will the Israeli authorities deny them the right to re-enter Palestine? This is a particular problem in Gaza, which the Norwegian Refugee Council has deemed, "the world's largest open-air prison." (Høvring, 2018).

Gaza: A Giant Open Air Prison

Gaza is separated from the other Palestinian territories of the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. It is one of the most densely populated areas of the world with almost 2 million residents packed into 365 square kilometers. Israel imposed an air, land and sea blockade on Gaza in 2007 after Hamas was democratically elected (Chomsky & Papp, 2013). There are only two border crossings to enter or leave Gaza from Israel and one border crossing to enter Egypt. Although Gaza rests on the Mediterranean Sea, the Israelis control the coastline, routinely shooting at Gaza fishermen who venture too far out to fish, and who are not allowed to

import navigational equipment for their fishing boats. The unemployment rate in Gaza at 47% is the highest in the world and youth unemployment is over 70%. Only 5% of the water is drinkable and 68% of the population suffers from food insecurity (Fayyad, 2019). There is only electricity for 4-8 hours a day because Gaza's power plant was bombed and Israel will not allow supplies to enter Gaza to rebuild it. The buildings, the airport, the entire infrastructure in Gaza—homes, schools, factories, and medical facilities—which have been destroyed or damaged, have not been rebuilt to capacity because Israel restricts equipment and building supplies which they deem could be used for combative purchases to attack Israel. OCHA, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) issued a report that Gaza would be totally uninhabitable by 2020 due to lack of potable water and untreated sewage (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, 2018),

Gaza: The Great March of Return

In March 2018, the people of Gaza began a series of weekly actions of mass civil disobedience to protest Israel's 12-year blockade on Gaza. Each Friday for over a year, they have marched to the fence to demand a right to return to their homes in Israel. The protests were initiated in January 2018 in a Facebook post by Palestinian poet and journalist Ahmed Abu Artema in response to Trump's announcement that he would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

In a May 14th opinion piece Abu Artema (2018) wrote for the *New York Times* he explained:

Palestinians long have held onto the dream of Jerusalem as our own capital, or at least as a shared capital in a country that offers equal rights to everyone. The feeling of betrayal and distress in Gaza was palpable....Most people my age have never been permitted to leave Gaza, since Egypt controls the southern land exit and Israel restricts access to the north—as well as forbids use of our sea and airport (or at least what's left of it after three wars).

Each week, despite heavy casualties, Palestinians have continued the weekly Great March of Return.

Israel's Law of Return and the Unrealized Palestinian Right of Return

Through the Israeli law known as the “Law of Return” (Bennis, 2007, p. 27), Jewish immigration from anywhere in the world is encouraged. Jewish immigrants from all over the world are welcomed and offered citizenship which includes not only an Israeli passport and the right to vote but also privileges, such as state-financed language classes, housing job training, and medical care. While all Jewish people have the right to immigrate to Israel, this right to return is denied to Palestinians (Muslim, Christian, Druze and others) whose grandparents fled their homes due to the war that established the state of Israel in 1947-1948. As refugees and the children and grandchildren of refugees, many Palestinians still have the keys to their homes, which they often proudly display in memory of their home villages. Some of these villages have been completely demolished while others have been taken over by Israelis. Other Palestinians became refugees in the 1967 Six-Day War and still others over the years have lost their homes, and farmland and factories due to demolitions and the building of the separation wall. According the United Nations Resolution 194, Palestinian refugees have the right to return to their homes, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the right of all refugees to return to their homes. However, the Palestinian right to return has never been recognized by the State of Israel and there is a need to recognize the rights of both peoples (Abdel-Nour, 2015).

Shifts in Foreign Policy Under Trump: A View from Palestine

As a language and literacy researcher, I have had the unique opportunity to witness first-hand the dramatic shifts in U.S. foreign policy in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, which have taken place during the 2018-2019 academic year. One such shift in policy was Trump's \$300 million funding cut to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, better known as UNRWA. It is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from UN Member States. Since it was established seventy years ago, UNRWA has received funding from every U.S. President Republican and Democrat alike. Until now the U.S. funded approximately 30% of the total UNRWA budget which supports schools, health care and emergency assistance to more than five million registered Palestinian refugees and their descendants, who fled or were expelled from

their homes during the 1947-1948 war (Amr, 2018). UNRWA funds 711 schools in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Approximately 500,000 Palestinian students receive free basic education from UNRWA. I saw the effects of the U.S. cuts on the closure of refugee schools in the West Bank. While UNRWA immediately engaged in fundraising efforts to other countries and individual donors to make up the difference, in the past year I have watched as some schools closed, and some UNRWA educational and medical staff lost their jobs. It reminds me of the situation for federal workers in the U.S., including federal contract workers such as TSA security in the airports, who worked without pay during the Federal Government shutdown.

U.S. Funds the Israeli Military \$3.8 Billion a Year

In contrast to the \$300 million aid to UNRWA for humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees—which Trump terminated—the U.S. funds the Israeli military \$3.8 billion a year. U.S. support for the Israeli military budget did not begin under Trump. Barack Obama signed a ten-year memorandum of understanding to allocate \$3.8 billion annually in 2016 (Baker & Davis, 2016). According to the Congressional Research Service Report prepared for members and committees of Congress, Israel receives more U.S. foreign military funding than any country in the world and it is anticipated that Israel will receive 61% of all U.S. military foreign funding this year (Sharp, 2018). \$3.8 billion a year to support the Israeli military is equivalent to a daily expenditure of \$10.5 million every day. The staggering amount of money that U.S. taxpayers spend on military spending for Israel requires a fundamental and dramatic change in U.S. foreign policy.

That debate concerning Palestine has been initiated by Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar, who is herself a Somali refugee, a Muslim and the first member of Congress to wear the hijab (Baker & Davis, 2016). She has been charged of anti-Semitism for her criticism of the Israeli Lobby American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). She has also been the target of a vicious media campaign to associate her with the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. On April 30, 2019 she was joined by 100 Black women who came to Washington, D. C. to stand with her including University of Chicago Professor, Barbara Ransby, Angela Davis, and the founders of Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM founder Patrice

Cullors, who helped organize the event explained the importance of solidarity between various communities under attack:

I think for our movement, protecting Ilhan means we are fighting against white supremacy. We actually have to be better at that, at protecting her as a symbol, at protecting the rights of Jewish people, at protecting the rights of communities of color, of women, of trans folks, of queer folks. This is that moment where we have the opportunity to really fight hard for everybody. (Pierce, 2019)

From the U.S. Mexican border to Palestine, there is a need for critical literacy and civic action concerning U.S. foreign policy and the treatment of refugees and immigrants. Critical literacy directs us to present multiple perspectives on historical and current events, to give our students as many options as possible for them to define themselves, their culture and their beliefs. We cannot be afraid to deal with controversial issues. At stake are the very lives of our students. Those of us who are U.S. citizens need to be actively engaged in speaking up and organizing and we need to work actively within our educational research and professional associations and unions. As Delgado-Gaitan (1996, p. 32) explain:

Power has a different meaning beyond counter-hegemonic ends. If people discover how they self-construct cultural meanings and identities within and against the ideological frameworks of mass culture, institutional settings and discourses—then students will have the critical tools with which to act in morally responsible, socially just and politically conscientious ways against individual and collective oppression.

An important feature of dialogic teaching and inquiry is to pose the question, “Knowledge for whom” or “who does knowledge serve?” and how can education be extended to those who have traditionally been denied the right to literacy? This entails becoming—and helping students become—a transformative or organic intellectual. That is, a person who uses critical tools to understand and act against individual and collective oppression of all forms—alienation, exploitation and abuse. It necessitates valuing memory—not just this week’s vocabulary, but rather the memory of one’s history, mother tongue and culture (Wong, 2005).

Critical paradigms in literacy and language work to extend education to those who have been denied the right to education, especially those who are the most vulnerable. The task for us as critical literacy researchers and educators is to examine the broader historical and socio-political contexts of the refugee crisis. We need to examine Palestinian analysis and perspectives that do not appear in mainstream media (Atawneh, 2011) and we need to employ critical discourse analysis to analyze and compare the coverage of the wars that have been conducted on Gaza (El-Bilawi, 2011).

As post-colonial literary critic Edward Said (2015, p. 240) stated:

All knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and interpretation. This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation... for interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place.

Become informed. Learn about multi-faith efforts to achieve a just peace in Palestine and Israel from the grassroots:

Kumi Now: An Inclusive Call for Nonviolent Action to Achieve a Just Peace

The word “Kumi” means “rise up.” *Kumi Now* is a call for action by Sabeel, a Palestinian Liberation Theology project. The authors of this book reached out to 48 faith-based and secular organizations in Palestine to introduce the work of the many grassroots and community organizations, their videos and publications, and to invite people of conscience around the world to support their efforts for nonviolent action for human rights and social justice. They have created a year of weekly activities for nonviolent action. These activities and informative lessons are clearly written with poetry, interviews and news reports that are appropriate for high school and university classrooms (Kumi Now, n.d.).

United We Dream is the largest immigrant rights organization of undocumented youth in the U.S. They do outreach to undocumented students in K-12 schools and hold know your rights workshops. They also are involved with campaigns and speaking to elected officials for human

rights, to protect the rights of undocumented, and for immigration reform (Gosnell, Mattson, Hernandez, & Saroughi, 2018).

Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) opposes anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim, and anti-Arab bigotry and oppression. JVP seeks an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; security and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians; a just solution for Palestinian refugees based on principles established in international law; an end to violence against civilians; and peace and justice for all peoples of the Middle East (Jewish Voice for Peace, n.d.).

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