[Somdeep Sen](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/somdeep-sen)

July 1, 2021

**Apartheid on campus**

On May 13, the United States-based online outlet Mondoweiss posted a video on Twitter that showed Palestinian students who were peacefully protesting at Ben Gurion University in Beersheba being attacked by Israeli police. The students were protesting against the forced expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in occupied East Jerusalem. As Palestinian students faced similar attacks at Israeli universities across the country, many of them fled campus and returned home.

Member of the Knesset Sami Abu Shehadeh and leader of Balad Party called on the Council of Higher Education and Minister of Education Yoav Galant to protect Palestinian students in Israeli universities. He said, “The protection of our students is a major and important demand for us due to the ongoing circumstances as they feel the loss of safety and security inside Israeli universities and school residencies.”

It would be easy to describe the attacks on university campuses as an exceptional occurrence, in a period of heightened political tensions, but Israeli universities have long been complicit in the victimisation of Palestinians by the Israeli occupation. In the research I conducted between 2013 and 2016 in Israel, I found that Israeli universities systematically discriminate against Palestinian students and communities, engage with the Israeli military industrial complex and fully support the state’s apartheid policies.

After visiting several universities in Israel, I found the history and campus of Hebrew University on Mount Scopus (HUJI) in occupied Jerusalem to be a great example of how higher education institutions became complicit in the Israeli settler-colonial project.

Founded in 1918, three decades before the establishment of Israel, the university was a marque initiative of Zionist activists in Europe. It was a place of refuge for exiled Jewish academics and students from Europe. But the building of the university was also considered synonymous with the remaking of Jewish nationhood. This symbolism was written into the design of the campus.

Standing atop Jerusalem’s Mount Scopus, the university has an unhindered view of Haram al-Sharif or Temple Mount. In fact, during the planning phases, it was called the Third Temple, signifying the re-establishment of the severed connection between the Jewish people and what they perceive as their divinely ordained homeland.

Aesthetically, the buildings of the original campus were inspired by Arab architecture as a way of ensuring that they seem indigenous to the surrounding landscape. However, as was pointed out to me by an Israeli architect, the grand Arab architecture-inspired domes and arches were meant to also “symbolise the muscularity of Zionism and the Jewish nation”.

The designers of the original master plan, Patrick Geddes and Frank Mears, chose to incorporate an Arab style of architecture, but they did so with a sense of contempt for the Palestinian population.

In a letter, Geddes wrote, “… any Western eye can see that the Arabs are dirty, untidy, in many ways degenerate, and is all too likely to overlook, or have difficulty in seeing, the qualities of their buildings”. He then went on to claim that it was the responsibility of the Zionists and HUJI to build a campus atop Mount Scopus that would symbolise the “New Jerusalem upon the hill”.

The contemporary campus is also dotted with Jewish nationalist iconography. A sign on a wall on campus dedicated by the American Friends of Hebrew University declares HUJI a “university of the Jewish people”. Another sign says that research and teaching at the university is conducted for “the benefit of Israel [and] the Jewish people”.

Expectedly, Palestinian students feel alienated by the campus and by what they consider an attempt to de-Palestinise a landscape that is integral to the Palestinian national territorial home.

A Palestinian alumnus said to me, “The university wants to show that this campus is only for Israelis. Part of the problem are all the Israeli flags, signs and statues on campus. It is also not allowed to do any political action or demonstrations supporting Palestinians.”

Of course, the antagonism of the university towards Palestinians is most evident in its relationship to the Palestinian communities in its vicinity. One such neighbourhood, Issawiya, is located in the valley on the eastern edge of the campus and has come to symbolise the disparity that exists between Israeli and Palestinian spaces.

Unmistakably, the well-maintained and carefully curated aesthetics of the campus stand in stark contrast to Issawiya’s congested and garbage-filled alleyways that are neglected by Israel’s Jerusalem municipality. For more than a decade, vehicles from Issawiya have also been unable to drive out of the village in the direction of Mount Scopus because of an army checkpoint. Palestinian students and the university-contracted workers from Issawiya are often frisked at this checkpoint before they are allowed to enter the campus.

Describing the relationship between HUJI and Issawiya, a Palestinian student said, “If you look at the campus, it stands above us. From Issawiya we have to look up to the campus on Mount Scopus. This means we look up, but they look down on us. This is the historic relationship we have with Hebrew University. It is a relationship between the coloniser and us. The goal is to make us disappear.”

Another student said, “I am lucky to be studying here but we are treated mostly as inferior to the Israeli students … Most people [from Issawiya] work here as cleaners, serve the food on campus, do all the dirty work. So, of course, they live on top of the hill and we are at the bottom.”

During episodes of violent escalations, Israeli universities do not hesitate to openly side with the Israeli army. During the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, for example, HUJI – along with other Israeli universities – chose to publicly support the brutal assault. In a letter to friends and alumni, the university announced that it was joining the war effort. It called for donations and encouraged donors to earmark their financial contributions “for the ‘Protective Edge’ fund”, referring to the name the Israeli army gave to its operation in Gaza.

Yet, in response to a 2014 silent demonstration by Palestinian students on campus against the administrative detention of Palestinian activists, the university administration called campus security and the police.

Excerpted: ‘Israeli apartheid on campus’

Aljazeera.com