



# Growing, in spite of: The story of the Islamic University of Gaza, 1977 – 2013



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*The story of the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) is not just a story of growth in numbers, from 25 students in 1978 to 20 000 in 2013; it is also a story of modernisation. In 1978, the only subjects taught to those 25 students studying in tents were Sharia Law and Arabic Language. Now Religious Foundation is a separate faculty, alongside faculties of Commerce, Engineering, Medicine and Arts.*

Until 1977, there was no university in the Gaza Strip. Students studied in Egypt, whose universities accepted hundreds of students from Gaza every year. Because of political disagreements between the PLO and the Egyptian authorities, Egypt drastically decreased the number of students they accepted. At the same time, the restrictions on travel and the expenses of studying abroad were high for the people of the Gaza Strip. A board of trustees from the Palestinian community in the Gaza Strip was formed and Shaikh Mohamed Awaad was the first chairman of the board. IUG was established as an extension of the Al-Azhar institution in Cairo. For its first five years, the university operated out of a collection of tents.

The growth of the university in its inception phase was not even. In 1987/88 student numbers were up to 4504 when the university, which has a strong Hamas affiliation as well as weaker links to Fatah, was closed by the Israeli authorities. By 1988/89 numbers had dwindled to 358.<sup>1</sup> What is interesting is the role of the community in keeping the university alive through the ensuing four years of closure. Classes were held in houses, mosques, clubs and public spaces. Lecturers continued in their posts, despite non-payment of salaries for several months at a time, and many arrests. Although the university was officially closed, an office was opened to allow student registration, particularly for students close to graduation. “Students and staff demonstrate the intense commitment to education that has long characterized



the Palestinian people” wrote Jimmy Carter in his introduction to Baramki’s book.<sup>2</sup> In 1989/90, student numbers had grown again to 1034.

Politics played a huge role in the fate of the university. After the signing of the Oslo agreement in 1993, the university was able to enter a stage of consolidation. Pre-fab buildings were replaced by permanent structures. New faculties were opened, and Masters’ programmes added to existing Bachelors’ degrees. The consolidation phase also had its ups and downs.

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The occupation of Gaza in December 2000 provided obstacles to the smooth functioning of the university. For example, the need to pass through barricades and military checkpoints meant that it could take staff, students and workers several hours to get to their jobs or homes whereas, in normal circumstances, it does not take more than 40 minutes to get from the far north to the far south of Gaza strip.

To avoid wasting time at checkpoints, IUG staff were relocated. Lectures were circulated through videos and emails. In addition, IUG leadership started building

new campuses to serve students in isolated areas where more than 30% of the total number of IUG students live.

During the war in December 2008, Israeli aircraft bombed and completely destroyed all the buildings of science and engineering laboratories, offices and classrooms. University staff responded by rescheduling lectures and postponing practicals. They also co-operated with local universities to use their laboratories for practical classes. They also started fund raising for reconstruction.

In 2010 a new phase of construction and development commenced. Money came in from the EU, Japan, Malaysia, Qatar, as well as Palestinian individuals and institutions in the diaspora. Turkey financed the building of a Medical Faculty complete with hospital; the first doctors graduated in 2012. IUG became a member of the Union of Arab and Islamic Universities and Universities of the Mediterranean in addition



to membership in the World Association of Universities. Several cooperation and partnership agreements were signed with many European, American, and other universities in the world.

Overcoming the obstacle the IUG faced, in partnership with local and diaspora communities, has developed a spirit of belonging and affiliation to and within the university. IUG has become the largest university in Palestine<sup>3</sup>, with high-calibre staff who win international recognition. For example, in 2006, prof. Mohamed Shabat won the Galileo International Prize for Optics. In 2009, Prof. Naser Farahat won the Majorana Award – for the best published research in the Italian E-Journal of Theoretical Physics. In 2006 and 2010, IUG won the Islamic Development Bank Prize for Science and Technology for their scientific research institutions. In 2012, IUG was awarded a UNESCO Chair in Astronomy, Astrophysics and space sciences. And, finally, just a few weeks ago, in January 2013, IUG won the first place among Arab countries universities in terms of green environmental standards.

In 2013, student numbers had grown to 21 000 student (61% are female and 39% are male) studying at 11 faculties with more than 110 specializations.

It is not just at university level that education is important to Palestinians. The World Bank estimated youth illiteracy in Gaza in 2012 as only 1%. But higher education has a particular role to play: “Having a university was crucial if we were to resist the occupation. We would produce well-educated, confident graduates, proud of their Palestinian identity and eager to contribute to the development of their homeland” wrote Baramki in 2010<sup>4</sup>.

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#### NOTES

1 Al-Sinwar and Muteer, 2009.

2 Baramki, 2010: p. ix.

3 In 2012 there were 5 universities in the Gaza strip.

4 Baramki, 2010: p 35.

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