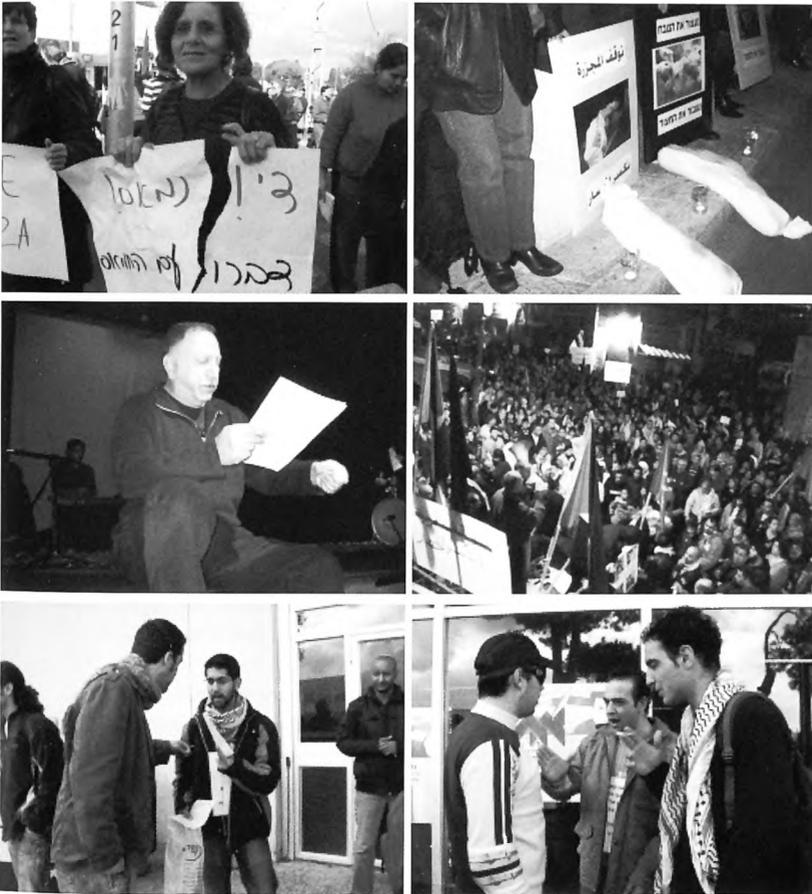


# On 26 December 2008 a group of lecturers

belonging to the Left Forum of Haifa University met with the Rector and the Dean of Students. We wanted to raise issues about the status of Palestinian Arabs on campus. Besides discrimination in employment opportunities and attitudes towards Arabs on the part of staff, we felt that the university was trying to hide its Arab population, fearing that increasing numbers would deter Jewish students and benefactors.

The following afternoon planes of the Israeli Air Force attacked the Gaza Strip. The number of reported deaths was rising at an alarming rate: 120, 140, 155. That very evening saw the first protest demonstrations in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Nazareth. The Jewish population responded, almost without exception, in automatic solidarity with the government and the army; only a few saw how the relentless cycle of war was once again undermining hopes of bridging the Arab-Jewish divide. Even the Haifa campus was severely disrupted. Our hopes of developing alternatives to tribal confrontation were dashed before we had time to formulate our first thoughts.

The university, with its 16,000 students, is blessed with “the most pluralistic nature of any of Israel’s universities” (according to the prospectus). More than 20% of students are Arab (compared with 9% of the 120,000 students in all of Israel’s universities). The university emphasises its numbers of Arabs when it wants to enlist the support of liberal benefactors who approve of pluralism, but plays them down when the potential donor is Jewish; there has already been a case where the university turned away a generous donation to the student accommodation fund because the donor insisted the money be spent exclusively for the benefit of Jews.



SHAHIN NASSAR. Demonstrations against the Gaza war.

The Arab students are conspicuous on the campus. Many who live out in the Galilee have difficulty finding or affording accommodation in the city and are forced to travel every day to and from their homes. Because public transport to the Arab settlements is minimal, they spend many hours hanging around the university corridors.

Jews aren't used to such an obtrusive Arab presence: the education system as a whole is "separate and unequal"; most neighbourhoods are mono-national; and even in mixed cities like Haifa the scale of segregation is high. In classes, many Jewish

students say they have never visited an Arab home, or have never had a serious conversation with an Arab. Worse still, some of them had their only real contact with Palestine Arabs in the course of military service in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The schism between the majority and the opponents of the war – Arabs plus a handful of Jews – divided the campus. An immediate instinct of those opposing the war was to demonstrate. According to university statutes, there was no need to ask for permission: everyone was entitled to demonstrate – during the intervals between classes on Mondays and Wednesdays.

The anti-war demonstrators were by and large student-members of the Islamic movement, the Arab Nationalist Party, Sons of the Country (Abna al-Balad, a small, radical Arab group), and Hadash, the longstanding Jewish-Arab party (with the Communist Party as one of its key components, most of its supporters Arabs, but with a universal base). About 200 Arab students, some dozen Jewish students and four lecturers (of whom I was one) joined the demo on 29 December, the third day of the war. It was similar in scale to protests by mainly pro-Palestinian supporters of recent years, and was held in the designated area for demonstrations known as “Protest Square”, only 100 metres from the “Lawn” Café, the most central point on the campus.

“Protest Square” is hidden away because the authorities claim that demonstrations in the café precinct would encourage confrontation between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators. But demonstrations against Israeli aggression in the occupied territories cannot be ignored. In an “instinctive” but highly-organised reflex the students’ union tends to set up a counter-demonstration, which the university authorities call a “spontaneous response”, avoiding the need to take disciplinary measures against nationalist Jewish students and risk being dubbed “Arab-lovers” – a serious charge in the current climate.

The counter-demonstrators gathered at the only point in the café precinct from which the anti-war protestors were visible. One side waved Palestinian Authority flags, and the other waved flags of the State of Israel. Some shouted slogans denouncing national leaders and the army, others chanted “The People of Israel Live.” Senior staff stood anxiously in the middle. Close by were scores of police officers. (Once Israel observed the European convention that police only enter campuses in exceptional circumstances, but that has changed. Today the cops take independent decisions on whether or not to go in, justified on the grounds of public order.)

Then I saw the Rector arguing with a group of Jewish students criticising the university authorities for allowing a demonstration against the war. The Rector told them what should be obvious to every student. The purpose of a university, he explained, was to enable students to express themselves freely on any subject they chose. Perhaps to absolve itself from the charge of condoning protest against the state, the university's governing body decided, "as a gesture of solidarity and support for the residents of the South and the soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces... to turn our main tower into a national flag". (This was publically announced by the university spokesman). The 30-storey tower, named after Levi Eshkol, a former Prime Minister, was illuminated at night by an image of the Star of David.

A week later, after the ground invasion of Gaza by the Israeli army and with the tally of Palestinian fatalities constantly rising, Arab student groups declared their intention of staging a demonstration on the Tuesday. They explained that it was being timed to coincide with simultaneous demonstrations on all the country's campuses, and for this reason they were rejecting the appeal from the Dean of Students to postpone the demonstration until Wednesday. The dean insisted that he couldn't authorise a demonstration on a Tuesday. The students congregated all the same, claiming that it was a protest meeting, not a demonstration.

This time hundreds of police officers were deployed all over the campus. Was the purpose to prevent violent confrontation between demonstrators, or was this a deliberate show of force? Hundreds of demonstrators (almost all of them Arabs) had been arrested around the country since the protests began, and it was apparently decided that the university campus would not be exempt. According to eye-witnesses, when the university authorities asked Arab students to disperse one protestor picked up a megaphone and called on his comrades to comply. But just as it seemed things were moving towards a peaceful conclusion, the police launched a brutal assault on demonstrators, arresting 12 of them. Charges were laid against some of the detainees. For its part the university started legal proceedings against five "activists".

The university's governing body then imposed a two-week moratorium on demonstrations. It also decided to move the stands used by political groups from the place where they had been for decades to an ancillary building in the depths of the campus, which demonstrators declined to use. The authorities claimed that the stands were provocative and threatened to disrupt studies. In the wake of all this, the Left Forum's original initiative was suspended.

The war ended, leaving relations between Jews and Arabs in disarray. During the war I chaired a seminar on Palestinian-Jewish relations, a mixed study group of youngsters who had been attending the same courses for three years and who knew one another well. There had been a friendly atmosphere throughout the group. But when I brought up the subject of the war, Jewish students were wholeheartedly in favour.

However, a few green shoots have pushed through. The leader of the Jewish-Arab Centre, a long established body on campus which promotes research into Palestinian-Israeli society and into relations between students from both sides, is convening a forum for lecturers who want to change the atmosphere on the campus. Unlike the Left Forum, this one is more official and may well be more effective in applying pressure - but there's no certainty that the project will continue.

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