

Speech at HCEF International Conference

{Name of Guests}

It is a great honor to be here today at the 20th HCEF International conference on Jerusalem's educational and communal development. Thank you Mr. Rabie for the invitation.

I bring with me the love from home and the kinship that binds us together despite our forced partition.

When I read the theme of the conference on the Question of Jerusalem, and the role of Palestinian Christians and Muslims in advancing its educational, cultural and social life, I was very excited to be part of it; we truly need to share perspectives and insights to re-envision our path toward a prosperous Palestine.

I remember President Mahmoud Abbas' address in front of the United Nations General Assembly in August. He asked a vital question about the future of Palestine, and Jerusalem in particular, he said- and I quote:

“When Jerusalem, refugees, security and other issues are removed from the table, what is left that can be provided to us as a part of a political solution for the Middle East?”

And I would like to add on to that: What can we do to bring our cause back to the table?

The situation in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza is a testament to years of inequity and neglect. So how can we -amid the turmoil and instability we face- keep growing into strong thriving societies?

It starts with education. Education is the fuel that runs the engine. For a glimpse of the importance of education for the prosperity of all communities, education is an integral part of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda and a key enabler for it. The right to education is a fundamental human right as established in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is encouraging to see that our government believes in the 2030 Agenda, and is placing education and higher education as a key priority in their long-term strategic plan.

Today, we have **14** Palestinian universities and **18** university colleges that offer bachelor degrees and diplomas. Higher- Education institutions have managed to thrive despite this turbulence.

It is estimated that the gross enrolment rate for the age group of 18-24 year olds is more than 25.8%. These percentages are relatively high by international standards, especially in comparison to other countries in the Middle East.

Dear guests,

We all have a responsibility and play a critical role, not only in the ongoing provision of quality education, but also in the long-term development of Palestinian higher education.

Since its inception by the women's rights activist Nabiha Nasir, in 1924, as a small school for girls, Birzeit University has been a thorn in the side of the occupation, insisting on playing its role of enlightenment and creating a multicultural Palestinian society inside its campus.

In the 1960, the school became a college and then a university in 1975 when the Nassers', a Palestinian family of intellectuals and national figures, donated some of their family land.

The expansion required widening the existing facilities, including the classrooms, laboratories, housing, recreational and sports facilities, and the library.

Efforts were undertaken to purchase land in the vicinity of the town, west of the old campus, while taking into consideration possible future expansion and development. This land is where the current facilities and new campus are located.

In the 1970s, and despite the occupation, Birzeit became a university, blending Palestinian values and Arab culture with an openness to world cultures.

I remember Dr. Hanna Nasir, who was the President of the university from (1972-2004), talking about his exile- he was also victim of the outrageous policies of Israelis; The university's board of trustees back then kept him in

his post as president of the university despite his exile. He opened an office in Amman- which is the closest to the West Bank and Birzeit itself.

He was able to obtain accreditation for Birzeit, and to get financial support to the students and the expansion of the university.

The university offered a great opportunity for all segments of Palestinian society to access higher education, in particular rural Palestinians and girls. The university campus has become a unique microcosm of Palestine, representing all layers of society: rural and urban, rich and poor, male and female, conservative and liberal.

These different groups have been able to gather in an atmosphere of freedom and respect for the opinion of the other. This marks Birzeit University's uniqueness and originality.

In fact, its strength and values were derived from its relations with society, and from the spirit of rebellion that motivated it against all attempts to break peoples' will.

The university was able to survive closures, arrests, and Israeli orders during its evolvment. Nevertheless, every year, Birzeit celebrates democracy, freedom of speech and expression in its annual student council elections.

The elections are a legacy that we are proud of. Every year, a day before polling, students hold a long public debate in the scorching midday sun on Birzeit's campus, with dominant issues including women's political participation and the general political scene in Palestine.

Distinguished guests,

Undoubtedly, the cruelest measure taken against the university community was the closure of universities, by military order, for long periods. This action deprived the students from engaging in their productive lives by delaying their graduation.

The university was closed fifteen times. The longest was between 1988-1992 for 51 months. It was amid a wave of closures of schools and education institutions. During this long closure, the university continued teaching in secret by creating study groups outside the university.

Since 2004, the university has been raided 11 times, four of the break-ins occurring in the past two years. Around 800 of the university's students have been arrested at one time, among them 16 female students. Currently over 60 students are detained in Israeli prisons, many under administrative detention with no charges.

We have seen how in the past few months our people living in area of Khan al-Ahmar, east of Jerusalem, are facing the threat of expulsion. Israel has been endeavoring to displace this community for settlement expansion, de facto annexation of the area and bisecting the West Bank, cutting it into two. Among these people who are facing displacement are children, young boys and girls who have dreams and ambitions to fulfill.

Our people in Jerusalem have always been targeted by the Israeli occupation. Do you think it is easy to cross a military checkpoint every morning to be able to reach a school or a university?

The checkpoints are set up on the way to the universities, not only for Jerusalemites but also between other cities such as Jenin, Nablus and Hebron.

The cohorts, faculty and staff who were at the university between 2001-2003 cannot forget the checkpoint that cut between Ramallah and Birzeit. It became a testimony to the ever-widening means and systems of oppression that Israel has developed to suppress our people.

The checkpoint's became a major repressive force in the lives of the 50,000 villagers and more than 6,000 students, faculty and staff who have to contend with it.

Unfortunately, Israel tries with all means to scatter us and hinder our development every day. The Israeli government has imposed huge impediments on the freedom of movement of Palestinian students and academics and on the movement of international academics working at Palestinian academic institutions, many of whom are of Palestinian origin and have family ties there. Some of them have been denied entry to the country, or have had their visa renewal applications rejected by the Israeli authorities.

We believe that in today's global academic environment of the 21st Century, having an internationally diverse faculty has become a fundamental cornerstone of academic excellence at universities worldwide.

If Birzeit University and Palestinian higher education as a whole are denied the right to engage international faculty members, what is ultimately being denied is our right to deliver a quality standard of education that meets the accepted global norm.

But amid the turbulence that we face as Palestinians, Birzeit University has managed to continue its mission in academia, research, and community

engagement, and stand out. Our recent university rankings have taken a turn for the better.

In 2018, QS University Rankings featured the first Palestinian university in its 2018 World Rankings, as Birzeit University outranked its national peers, and broke into the top 3% of universities worldwide.

This comes on the heels of QS choosing Birzeit University as one of the leading 100 Arab universities for the **third** time consecutively.

That is really what this celebration of student academic excellence is all about—we're celebrating not only the fruits of academic excellence, but the creative and intellectual process that led up to them.

And we are still working on several developments, which make it easy to believe that this distinction will continue. With 9 faculties, 111 programs, and more than 14 thousand students, the university will continue in moving forward.

During the long closure of 1988, off-campus teaching acquired great importance, and innovative ways were devised to carry it out. Junior students joined, but always in small groups of five to ten, in faculty and students' homes, mosques and churches.

The investment we made in knowledge back then, gave us the push to continue our mission providing an a enlightened university environment that celebrates creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship in teaching, learning and research to contribute to society's progress and advancement through transformative knowledge.

We are now required more than ever to offer programs and initiatives that inspire the attitudes and behaviors of others to engage in value based and purpose-critical efforts, in order to influence their communities and create change!

We, at Birzeit University, have taken notice of this and we started to take action a few years ago:

1. Building on Birzeit University's history of community service and earlier training programs, we started the “Leadership and Active Citizenship Program- Masari” last year by seeking first-year students accepted for the academic year 2017-2018.

It continues this year by welcoming new and second-year undergraduates, with a focus on empowering them to become active citizens and forward-looking leaders.

The learning journey of “Masari” spans a period of three years, during which students complete six stations: Personal Competencies, Career Path, Debating, Citizenship, and Social Entrepreneurship. Training for each of the stations is delivered through 21 training hours.

2. We have recently launched Birzeit Business Hub (B-Hub) to address the problems of small enterprises and student employability, with the generous support from the European Union. At the business-hub, students will develop their skills and competencies and small

companies can build their capacities and get custom solutions to their specific problems or improve operations and grow.

3. We are also involved in “Palestine-India Techno Park”, based at Birzeit University, which serves as an integration between academia and business, and provides state-of-the-art technology. The Techno Park will help in creating work, business and other innovative opportunities for young Palestinians

Twenty acres of Birzeit University’s campus grounds were donated to the park by the university’s board of trustees, citing the park’s proximity to academic research centers and an active student body as catalysts for its future success. The park’s location also benefits the students by providing jobs, training, and networking opportunities.

The park strives to position itself as a leader and exemplar for Palestinian universities, an incubator of new technological startups and a leading research and development center in various disciplines such as virtual reality; digital and media broadcast; renewable energy; robotics, and others

4. And most recently, we inaugurated our 9th faculty, of Art, Music and Design, with a generous donation from Palestinian philanthropist and businessman Samir Awaidah. The faculty is artistic not only in its approach and structure but also in its teaching methodologies and emphasis on specialized skills and knowledge, experiential learning through studio culture, and exposure locally and internationally

Dear guests,

Palestinian universities have developed under abnormal circumstances. It is remarkable that they have grown quantitatively and qualitatively, even under such adverse conditions.

We live in a time when knowledge is ever more vital to our societies and economies, in a world of rapidly circulating capital and people and of revolutionary developments.

We especially hope that such academic initiatives, as this conference, will shed light on Palestine's challenges and successes.

We need to be united, wherever we are in the world, to work together for the world to hear our voices.

Thank you