

Speech at the Holy Land Fund Gala Dinner

{Names of guest}

Today, I feel honored and privileged to be the keynote speaker at the Holy Land Fund's 50th anniversary. I am grateful to the Holy Land Fund for their love and support for Birzeit University.

Allow me to announce from this platform that just a couple of hours ago, Birzeit University won the prestigious Yasser Arafat Achievement Award that aims to encourage exceptional work and to recognize real achievements in different areas including academia.

Mabrook Birzeit University. Congratulations to all of us!

I am delighted to share this triumph with you; our friends and great supporters.

Over my three years of presidency at Birzeit University, I have been fortunate to witness the generosity of The Holy Land Fund toward education in Palestine. I have great admiration for the effective philanthropic leadership practice that the foundation puts into academia in its home country- Palestine.

Indeed, by offering \$50,000 annually to our students, you have contributed to partial scholarships for 184 students over the past three academic years.

I am now more confident than ever in the deep-seated connection of the Palestinian Diaspora to its homeland.

Distinguished guests,

“Behind every door, there is a story”. It has been claimed that a Diaspora is collection of people or communities of scattered individuals bound by some shared history.

However, each and every one of us holds a story that is narrated by the living stones of our homeland.

Unfortunately, Israel is still trying to scatter us even more. The Israeli authorities 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.

Recently, the Trump administration has been trying to cut aid funding to the Palestinians and has slashed its contributions to UNRWA – the UN agency that supports more than 5 million Palestinian refugees across the Middle East. These cuts have hit hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people already, especially in Gaza.

These policies are **alarming**. Just recently, scores of foreign passport holders, many of Palestinian origin but without residence documents, living and working in the occupied Palestinian territory have been denied entry in the country, or have had their visa renewal applications refused by the Israeli authorities.

We believe that our international-Palestinian professors have all the right to teach in their home country. In addition, education is UNRWA's largest program, which has provided jobs and learning opportunities for thousands of Palestinians, whether in Palestine itself or in exile.

Let us join efforts to stop these practices from ruining our education systems- from ruining our Palestine.

Each and every Palestinian, regardless of country of residence or passport, plays a critical role, not only in the ongoing provision of quality education at Birzeit University, but also in the long-term development of Palestinian higher education.

Birzeit is working closely with the relevant parties to stop this disastrous policy, and is with all means fighting for the elimination of all expressions of ghettoization, racism, and intolerance, to raise our future generations free from hatred, and are part of their indigenous country despite all obstacles and geographical borders.

Through its international program “Palestine- Arab Studies Program (PAS), Birzeit has unveiled a new grant for students in the Diaspora to come and learn Arabic in their homeland-Palestine. It is a partial grant provides Palestinian students and young adults from various parts of the world with the opportunity study the Arabic language with social science classes taught by knowledgeable, experienced and passionate teachers.

We especially hope that this initiative will create long-term engagement with our brothers and sisters, and with the new generation in diaspora. Palestinians need to gather to forge a unified diaspora; a diaspora of intellectuals, decision-making politicians, scientists, professionals, and artists who will carve a way forward for Palestine.

Honored guests,

It is true that we live in a changing and challenging world that has not been fair to us. Our social and educational systems have suffered from decades under occupation and even with current attempts at reform, results will not happen overnight. We have generations of university students and graduates facing injustice and unemployment.

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 as an entrepreneurial institution with all its constituents actively engaged in knowledge production both nationally and globally.

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.

And we are working on several developments, which make it easy to believe that this distinction will continue.

We have drawn up a **new strategy** that revolves around "Entrepreneurial Role & Being", in which our core mission centers on providing an independent, intellectual environment that celebrates freedom of thought and expression, embraces democratic practices and dialogue. These values are derived from its relations with the 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 involvement. 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 -long public debate during midday sun on Birzeit's campus, with dominant issues including women's political participation and the general political scene in Palestine.

The university also inspires excellence, creativity, and innovation in teaching, learning, and research, and contributes to social progress through transformative knowledge and capacity development.

The entrepreneurial formation of Birzeit University started **in 1924** with its launch as a primary school for girls. This first building block rolled out a legacy of knowledge and learning.

With 9 faculties, 111 programs, and more than 14 thousand students, the university will continue in moving forward.

Behind the numbers and the accolades– at the very heart of Birzeit – are **curious** students engaging with talented faculty – learning together, asking questions, and communicating ideas, create solutions in a learner-centered stimulating environment

Let me mention few of our endeavors in the past couple of years:

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 leaning through studio culture, and exposure locally and internationally

For us, every challenge becomes a possibility. The strategy work, which was carried out last year together with our staff, helped us recognize the strengths of the University. These strengths help us to profile ourselves and maintain our strong position in the changing academic world.

With our new strategy and methods, we seek to support top-class research and education in our selected focus areas, so that we can keep producing new knowledge to build a healthier, more sustainable, more intelligent, and more humane world.

But again with all these accomplishments, we must continue to represent the cutting edge in expertise among the universities of the world. Universities, especially in Palestine, are under pressure.

We all know how higher education affects the economy, society, and culture of Palestine. It is vital to the country's continued growth and development.

Palestine's higher education sector has emerged in recent years and distinguished itself in the region. However, the most recent period has been turbulent, marked by a lack of suitable planning or a unified university strategy, and an increase in the number of universities relative to the demographic distribution of Palestinians.

At Birzeit University, student fees cover only 60% of the university's budget, and the remaining 40% are covered by the university from other resources. The university seeks to promote higher education, even among those who may have difficulty affording it.

Nevertheless, insufficient funding has been a major ongoing concern for Palestinian universities, due to the government's dwindling contribution to higher education and irregularity in tuition payments.

The university is one body comprised of faculty, staff and students. The complexity of the financial dilemma is challenging, but also energizing, as the university's components work together to get better at what we do – for our students, for the larger society, and for the generations to come.

We are pleased to see the Holy Land Fund and other Palestinian Diaspora organizations support education, providing every Palestinian the opportunity to discover a path through education.

Dear guests,

Allow me to express my deep gratitude for your generosity again, and let us celebrate, on this occasion, those who have risen above great odds to pursue their degrees. Birzeit University is blessed with dedicated friends who support our efforts in so many ways.

We are all expected to prioritize knowledge generation and synthesis across disciplines and bring forth new possibilities of transformative change for the university and our society.

The most important part of education is to help our students reveal the richness within, and as the American journalist Sydney Harris once said: “There are pearls in each of us, if only we knew how to cultivate them with ardor and persistence.”

I wish you all a wonderful 50th anniversary!