

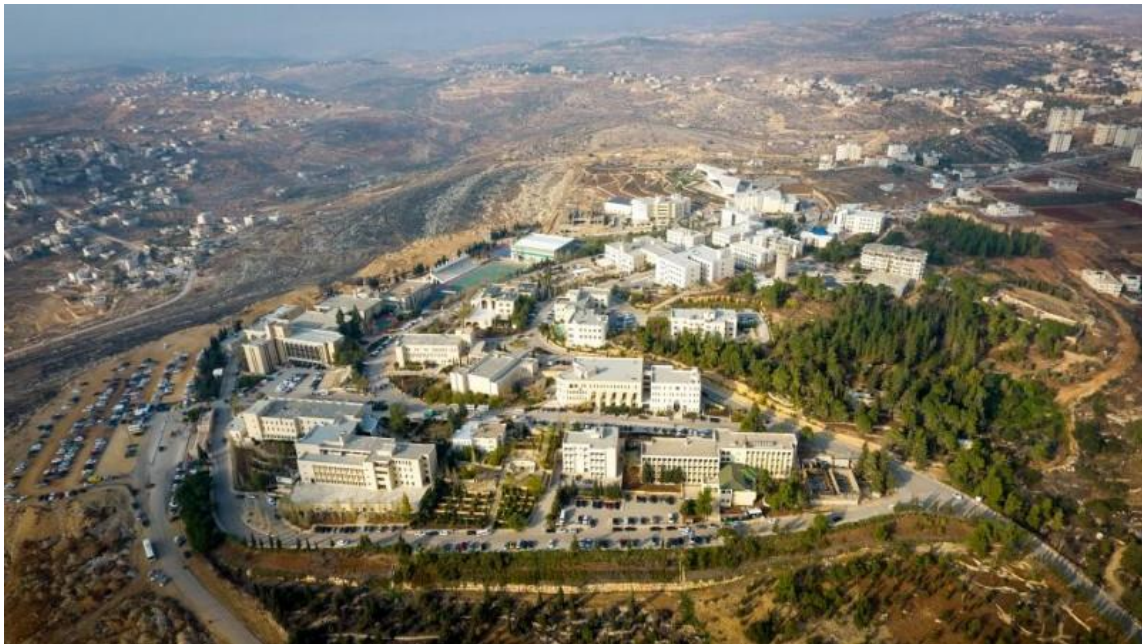


No Passage to Palestinian Universities

Birzeit University joins two human rights groups to challenge Israeli visa policies that they say are blocking foreign faculty from coming to the West Bank to teach -- or forcing them to leave.

By [Elizabeth Redden](#)

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[Birzeit University](#)

Roger Heacock first started teaching at Birzeit University, a Palestinian institution in the occupied West Bank, in 1985. An American citizen, Heacock built a career and raised three children there. For many years he came and went largely without incident, renewing his visa every three months.

But over the past couple of years, Palestinian universities and human rights groups say, it's become increasingly difficult for foreigners like Heacock who work in the West Bank to get permission from Israel, which controls access to the Palestinian territories, to renew their visas, or to come there to teach in the first place.

In May 2018, Heacock and his wife -- also a Birzeit employee and a U.S. citizen -- were returning from a short stint abroad. Upon re-entry, Heacock said, they were given a two- or three-week visa, even though their work permits were valid through the end of the academic year in September, for him, and the end of the calendar year for his wife. He was given no reason, he said, but told to take his grievance up with Israeli military authorities (which he tried, unsuccessfully).

"We rushed around to get out," said Heacock, a retired professor of history at Birzeit. "We got rid of our rental apartment; we gave away hundreds or thousands of books, our furniture, what we had accumulated over 35 years" (he'd first moved to the West Bank in 1983).

Heacock and his wife attempted to return to the West Bank this past March -- he had a 30-hour teaching assignment at Bethlehem University, and he still supervises graduate students at Birzeit -- but he said they were stopped at the border with Israel and told that they failed to get the necessary permission from the Israeli military's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories.

"We said we've been coming for 35 years," recalled Heacock, who is now living in Paris. "No one said we needed permission."

Heacock's case is not unique. Birzeit reports that between 2017 and 2019, four full-time and three-part time international lecturers were forced to leave the country when Israel refused to renew their visas, and that in 2019 Israel denied entry to two international lecturers with Birzeit contracts.

“Not a single international faculty member, with the exception of those directly employed by foreign government-sponsored programs, was issued a visa for the length of their 2018-2019 academic year contract,” the university said in [a July 20 press release](#). “As of press time, six full-time international faculty members contracted for the 2018-2019 academic year are without valid visas; another five -- including a department chair -- are overseas with no clear indications of whether they will be able to return and secure visas required for them to stay for the coming academic year. Over 12 departments and programs face losing faculty members in the coming academic year because of the Israeli policy.”

Birzeit has joined with Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, and Al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights group, to challenge Israeli visa policy. The groups claim that for the past two years, “Israel has been escalating the visa restrictions it is imposing on international academics, including: denial of entry to the West Bank; refusing visa extensions; delays in processing visa extension applications beyond the duration of the period the visa is valid; arbitrarily granting visas for short periods, sometimes ranging from only two weeks to three months; restricting visas to the West Bank only and permitting entry and exit only via the Allenby Bridge crossing rather than via Ben Gurion Airport; [and] requirements to deposit large sums as guarantees, sometimes as much as ... 80,000 [new Israeli shekels] (approximately \$23,300).”

In April, Sawsan Zaher, an attorney at Adalah who is representing Birzeit in its suit, [wrote to Israeli authorities](#) on behalf of Birzeit demanding that they lift restrictions on the entry to the West Bank for visiting foreign academics, that they “refrain from imposing arbitrary restrictions” on the duration or extension of scholars’ stay and that they “order the publication of a clear and proper procedure for issuing entry visas and visa extensions for foreign academics in the West Bank, similar to the procedure that exists for Israeli institutions of higher education that seek to hire foreign lecturers or researchers.” Israeli universities attract many visiting foreign faculty, and Zaher's letter notes that Israel has [detailed regulations](#) in place allowing them to apply for and extend work permits.

In an interview, Zaher said Israeli officials have not yet provided a substantive response to the letter. Zaher said the regulation governing entry for foreign academics to the West Bank hasn't recently changed, but that they “are very vague and they enable as such the arbitrary enforcement that is being done now.”

“The fact that there is an occupation, even if it is a prolonged Israeli occupation over the West Bank, does not cancel the academic freedom of a university in Palestine to decide and determine who will be brought to teach and for what time and what kind of research,” Zaher said. “The international humanitarian law that applies, which is the law of occupation, imposes an obligation on the state of Israel as an occupying power -- the obligation not to intercede in the civil life of the local population, unless there is a security necessity. None of the professors that were denied extension of permit and had to leave were denied the extension because of security reasons.”

“Blocking our right to engage international academics is part of an ongoing effort by the Israeli occupation to marginalize Palestinian institutions of higher

education,” Birzeit’s president, Abdullatif Abuhijleh, said in a statement. “The latest escalation in visa restrictions is just one in a long-standing and systematic Israeli policy of undermining the independence and viability of Palestinian higher education institutions.”

The Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom has also weighed in with [a July 15 letter](#) echoing the demands of Birzeit and the two legal and human rights groups.

The Israeli Embassy in Washington did not comment over several days.

Read more by [Elizabeth Redden](#)

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/07/26/groups-protest-israeli-visa-policies-foreign-academics-teaching-west-bank?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=aa786cb6c3-DNU_2019_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-aa786cb6c3-200040001&mc_cid=aa786cb6c3&mc_eid=20a6b0e480