

# The Wolf Prize and Supporting Palestinian Education

While in Israel to receive a Wolf Prize, I wrote the following to explain what the Wolf Prize meant to me:

“Mathematics is flourishing today as a vibrant international community, scholars free to travel, talk, and learn from each other anywhere in the world. Here is my own experience: the work for which I have received this prize owes more than I can say to sharing ideas when I was young with Jun-Ichi Igusa from Japan, C. S. Seshadri from India, Alexander Grothendieck, a stateless person—and many others. It was startling and moving when, as a young man, I received a letter from Seshadri, from halfway around the world, telling me that his and Narasimhan’s work had led them to the same results as mine.

“Mathematics in Israel flourishes today on this high international plane. Its lifeblood is the free exchange of ideas with scholars visiting, teaching, learning from each other, traveling everywhere in the world. But sadly this is not the case in occupied Palestine where education struggles to continue and travel is greatly limited. Therefore I have decided to donate my part of the Wolf Prize in Mathematics to the cause of helping the university community in occupied Palestine survive and flourish. Its continued existence affects crucially the opportunities and dreams of the next generation and specifically whether potential mathematicians there have the opportunity to join this international community of scholars.

“For this reason, I am giving half of my prize to the Israeli foundation ‘Gisha’ (<http://www.gisha.org>) which works to further the right to education and freedom of movement of Palestinians and half to Birzeit University (<http://www.birzeit.edu>) directly.”

This statement was made public as part of a press release by Gisha the day after the ceremony. This resulted in a wave of emails in my inbox, comments on blogs, and letters to *Ha’aretz*. In these comments, I have been called a racist, an anti-semitic and even a dingbat by some, but also a true mensch and “*avec du panache*” by others. I reject vehemently the first two and don’t feel the others are very accurate either. But clearly a small act like mine strikes a deep emotional chord—positive or negative—for many. I have received moving testimonies from Palestinians who are so grateful for this recognition of their situation; and I have also received expressions of fear by Israelis that any student body in the West Bank could be a hotbed for the intifada. There is no way to totally refute this fear—after all, even Harvard had its unabomber—but Birzeit is a remarkable educational institution, doing its best to teach the values and skills needed in a civilized society.

I was very pleased that my own belief in the importance of Palestinian education to the well being of Israel as

well as of Palestine was echoed this June by both Israeli Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubinstein and by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Justice Rubenstein told the State Attorney that the ban on allowing students from Gaza to study abroad seems “no less harmful to the Israeli interest, because we have to live with the Palestinians in the future, too.” Rubinstein expressed the opinion that preventing students from accessing education “harms chances for some kind of co-existence.” Secretary Rice said that “if you cannot engage young people and give them a complete horizon to their expectations and to their dreams, then I don’t know that there would be any future for Palestine” (quoted from Gisha’s website).

It’s important to realize that Birzeit is an active vibrant modern university. After the 1967 war, when the West Bank was occupied, the Palestinians realized that they needed to create their own universities, and Birzeit was the first, starting in the early 1970s. Today it has about 7,500 students studying arts, science, engineering, law, commerce and economics, and information technology; it is starting new programs in nursing and pharmacology. Half its students are male, half female. Most of the students are studying for a bachelor’s degree, but about 20% are studying for a master’s degree. It occupies a striking modern campus built atop a hill with the help of support from many countries, especially the European Union. It has been closed intermittently in the past by Israel but now has been operating continuously for seven years. Although the intifada does break out in violence sometimes, life in the West Bank, as in Israel, is essentially peaceful and continues, working as best it can around the roadblocks and other obstacles of the occupation. It is just as feasible for visitors to stay in Ramallah as in West Jerusalem.

What is particularly exciting to the mathematical community is that a “Center of Excellence in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics” is starting up at Birzeit (see the proposal at <http://www.peace-programme.org/content/view/20/30/>). With the support of UNESCO, a chair has been created for the director of the proposed Center and it is now filled by Professor Henry Jaqaman. The Center held its first international meeting this July (<http://www.peace-programme.org/content/view/74/5/>). My report is that mathematics at Birzeit is on an upward trend and is flourishing.

—David Mumford  
Brown University  
[david\\_mumford@brown.edu](mailto:david_mumford@brown.edu)