

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY VISIT TO BIRZEIT UNIVERSITY

February 5, 2003

The first part of my visit to Israel (Jan. 6 - Jan. 15, 2003) was ``as usual''. A conference at Eilat, seminars at Weizmann and Technion and visits with relatives in Jerusalem. The less usual part was a seminar at the Palestinian university of Birzeit and a wonderful day with Edriss Titi (an Israeli Arab who just became a professor at Weizmann) and his family in Akko. I have many things to report about all aspects of the visit but will confine myself here to some impressions of my visit to Birzeit University.

The final arrangements for my visit to Birzeit were made over the phone with my host, Dr. Aziz Shawabka, Dean of Science at Birzeit (my initial contact with him was through Vincent Rivasseau). I was to meet Professor Iyad Jaber, the head of the computer science department at Birzeit at 8AM Tuesday, January 14, 2003, in front of the American Consulate, at 27 Nablus Road in East Jerusalem. My friend Shalom Baer drove me from my cousin's house in West Jerusalem, and after a few minutes Prof. Jaber came by and I was off. Prof. Jaber lives in East Jerusalem and commutes four or five times weekly to Birzeit. Because of his status as an East Jerusalem resident, Prof. Jaber has an Israeli ID and license plates which permit him to travel on roads in the West Bank from which West Bank Palestinians are excluded [1].

The ride was smooth - with some drizzle and fog as we neared Ramallah and Birzeit. On the way Prof. Jaber, who got his Masters' degree in computing at the American University in Washington, told me that the computer situation in Birzeit was quite good and that he had a good staff. He mentioned that during the closure of Birzeit for two months the previous spring they continued lessons via the Internet so students could finish their semester. After a while we turned off the good road and then, a few kilometers from Birzeit, there was a check point with a few Israeli soldiers. Prof. Jaber stopped his car and showed them his ID, I showed them my passport and we were through in a minute.

We then arrived in the village of Birzeit which looked drab and dilapidated under the drizzle. We passed by some unfinished apartment buildings and finally arrived at the university. In contrast to the village the campus looked very prosperous. It is about a dozen years old with very nice four-story stone buildings (donated mainly by wealthy Palestinians and other Arabs).

We parked the car and walked to the science building. To my pleasant surprise, things looked very, very normal, with students milling about in front of the building. Aside from the traditional long-sleeved dresses and head scarves worn by many of the women, it could have been any small university campus in the US or in Europe. There are about 5,000 students in Birzeit and the campus has functioned normally (without closures) since the fall semester began.

Jaber then took me to the office of Dr. Aziz Shawabka who was very welcoming. Aziz got his Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Colorado in Boulder but had been in administration for the last five or six years. He told me that the economic situation at the university is quite bad and that all of last year the faculty got only half their salaries. (I didn't find out how much the full salary is but my impression was that it was not very high.) This led to a strike (or a threat of a strike) by the faculty and for the last three months they were getting the full salary but are uncertain how long that will last. (The budget comes apparently in equal portions from tuition, Palestinian Authority and donations from Arab countries.)

I told Aziz that my Israeli colleagues at Weizmann, Technion and other places, were all very eager to cooperate with their Palestinian colleagues, but felt that Palestinians were not willing to do that. Dr. Shawabka confirmed that this is indeed the case at the present time both for security reasons and political reasons. (Security reasons are obvious given the current situation. In fact, the Israeli government has prohibited its citizens, for security reasons, to visit Palestinian areas in the West Bank or Gaza at the present time.) As for the political situation, it is such that the Palestinian academics would feel uncomfortable getting special permission to go to Israel while it is still difficult for other Palestinians to pass checkpoints on their way to hospitals. Both Aziz and others with whom I spoke later expressed the hope that this will change in the future. When asked if they had any objection to meeting Israelis at conferences abroad or to visitors like me going to both Israeli universities and to Birzeit, everyone said emphatically no.

Just before 10AM the French mathematician, Prof. Ivar Ekeland, who was on a longer visit to Birzeit, came in and we all went to his seminar. The seminar was attended by about 50 people. Ekeland gave an excellent talk, in English, about some mathematically very interesting optimization problems arising from "asymmetry of information" in

economics. (Ekeland and I have strong differences about the question of collaboration between European and Israeli universities but that is another story.)

After the talk we went to a conference room where Prof. Shawabka had invited faculty members from the sciences to talk to us. There were about a dozen faculty members there, out of a total of 60 science faculty members (of whom about 45 have Ph.D.s). After we introduced ourselves, the Birzeit faculty members expressed their strong interest in opportunities to spend time in Europe and the US doing science. There are currently a few Fulbright fellowships to travel to the US and some programs in European countries but these are quite limited so additional funding is highly desired. I repeated that I had just come from visiting various Israeli universities and that there are many people there very eager to collaborate scientifically. While apparently accepting the good intentions of the Israeli scientists, they told me again that this is not the right time for that [2]. I then said that I would look into what possibilities there are for Palestinian scientists to visit the US with funds from government agencies like the NSF or from private organizations like the Sloan Foundation.

Sitting next to me was Prof. Safi Safi who is in charge of physics demonstrations at Birzeit and had visited Rutgers some years ago. He told me that he was trying to raise money for building a science museum at Birzeit or nearby. This seems to me a really excellent idea and I told him that I would inquire about possible sources for funding [3]. In addition, some people in biology raised the problem of building up the infrastructure necessary to do experiments in Birzeit.

There was also a report from Ekeland on his program[4] and I was told that the physics department had started a program in computer simulation, since the number of students interested in majoring in physics was rather small. Having visitors from Europe and the US who are active in computer simulations come to visit would be helpful, and I will try to facilitate that. The meeting ended with my asking Dr. Shawabka to send me a list of all the faculty members interested in this kind of collaboration with description of their interests, and he promised to do this.

We then left the meeting and walked over with Shawabka and Ekeland to the office of Dr. Hanna Nasir, the President of Birzeit University, with whom we were going to have lunch. (Dr. Nasir got his Ph.D. in physics from Purdue University.) We got to his office, had a very cordial welcome and I was introduced to the vice president and other administrators. Dr. Nasir immediately launched into a political discussion mostly just between the two of us. I told Dr. Nasir about The Call for Moderation [5], and asked for his comments about the Ayalon-Nusseibeh declaration [5] which I support. Nasir responded that basically this was OK but that Nusseibeh had put his foot in the wrong place many times. (I had heard on the radio earlier that morning that the day before Prof. Nusseibeh, who is the president of Al Quds University in East Jerusalem, and an active worker for peace between Israel and Palestinians, was prevented from giving a talk at the University of Nablus, by students who called him a coward and other derogatory names.)

In the following discussion about the different perceptions by Israelis and Palestinians about the current situation I asked Nasir about statements by Arafat and others from the PA, often quoted by Israelis and Americans, saying that the Oslo Agreement was just a first step in a program which would really make all of Israel into a Palestinian state. Nasir responded (disingenuously, I thought) that he did not know about such statements and that he was part of a committee involved in the Palestinian Authority officially recognizing Israel. (President Nasir is the head of the Central Elections Committee and a member of the Palestinian National Council.) He added that of course there are extremists who don't agree with that but that it was the official Palestinian position. I told him I would send him information about the statements by Arafat.

Nasir later said that maybe in the long term there ought to be just a single democratic state. I said that this would mean that Israel would no longer be a Jewish State. He agreed but said there was already a philosophical question of how Israel can be a Jewish state while the population was 20% Arab. I said I didn't see any insurmountable problem with that. After all France has 10% Arabs and is still a French state. Of course that would be impossible if the population was half and half or if the majority were Arabs. In any case, I don't see a one-state solution in the foreseeable future. All I can see at the present time is really a two-state solution along the Ayalon-Nusseibeh prescription. He seemed to agree.

I then brought up the question about suicide bombers and that I did not see enough condemnation of it from the Palestinian leadership and intellectuals. Nasir responded that he had written statements in arabic opposing suicide attacks. He added however that really the Israelis should think about what they have done to make these people willing to commit suicide. (While I agree that the Israelis have done many things wrong, particularly the settlements, which Nasir said were designed to establish ``facts on the ground" that would make a viable Palestinian state impossible I was very disappointed by his refusal to really come straight out and condemn those who incite the young

people to hate and kill including committing suicide attacks: see Le Monde, January 15, 2003, p. 13, discussing an article by Amira Hass, a well known Haaretz journalist sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, on this subject.)

Meanwhile, Tanya Nasir, the wife of the president, joined us. She was dressed in Western style and immediately joined the conversation. She described her crossing the checkpoint between Birzeit and Ramallah, where it is impossible to cross by car for a distance of about one kilometer. It was a muddy day and some old person was being moved across in a wheelbarrow. Seeing a sympathetic-looking Israeli soldier she went up to him and said: "Do you see what you are doing to these people". He didn't have any answer but then some other soldiers came up who were much less sympathetic and became angry with her. She then became very excited and started banging on the tank and said it was terrible to treat people that way, but the soldiers said it was just part of security because of recent attacks [6].

The discussion went on back and forth and the time soon came to have lunch. As we moved to lunch I was told that one of the Birzeit people in our group, had signed the Call for Moderation. The discussion continued during lunch and soon the time came to go to my seminar. I told President Nasir that I would be seeing the President of the Israel Academy, Yakov Ziv, the next morning and asked Nasir whether there was any message he wanted me to convey to him. Nasir then told me that a few weeks earlier the Israeli army had, for the first time in a long period, entered Birzeit University, forcing the gates to be opened. They came in with some jeeps, drove through the campus, and left. He said it was lucky it had happened on a Friday, when there were very few students on the campus. He was afraid, however, that if they returned during regular school time there would likely be incidents with potentially serious consequences.

(As we were walking out, Tanya Nasir came up to me and said she had just learned from Ekeland that I was a Holocaust survivor and she expressed her sympathy and condolences.)

My seminar, which was on the subject of Microscopic Origin of Macroscopic Behavior, had an audience of between 40-50 people. Some faculty apologized for not being able to come because they had to give classes.

After the seminar Ekeland wanted us to go to the Birzeit-Ramallah checkpoint mentioned by Tanya Nasir so that I could see for myself what it's like. This we did, but there really wasn't very much I could see except that drivers of cars, taxis, or minivans discharged passengers on the Birzeit side. These people then had to walk over what seemed a long stretch of terrain past checkpoints I couldn't clearly see, to another line of taxis on the Ramallah side to continue their journey. (I couldn't tell the exact distance.) We then returned to Birzeit and got into the car of Dr. Ismael Badran to go back to Jerusalem.

As soon as we got outside of the campus we ran into a checkpoint where there was a long line of waiting cars. Dr. Badran said it might take us hours to cross the checkpoint, which normally took half an hour to forty-five minutes. Indeed, after one hour we had only progressed about 25 meters and we were still about 50 meters from the actual checkpoint [7]. Finally Dr. Badran decided to pull out of the line and go ahead to the checkpoint in the hope that, since he had an East Jerusalem license plate and had foreigners in his car, they would let us pass instead of sending us back to the end of the line. The maneuver worked. After showing our documents we were permitted to pass and we then went along smoothly towards Jerusalem. One of the physics professors in the car was an Israeli Arab. He had received his Ph.D. from the Hebrew University and was interested in spending a sabbatical year at an Israeli university. It seemed to me that this should be possible and I offered to try to be helpful. We then dropped him off near his house and soon passed through another checkpoint, but that one took only a minute. After taking Prof. Ekeland to his hotel, The American Colony in East Jerusalem, I was taken to my cousins' house in West Jerusalem, which Dr. Badran said was quite close to his own house in East Jerusalem. Still he was quite unfamiliar with the neighborhood and it took us some time to get there. I was most appreciative of this hospitality [8].

1. I don't know the history of the roads or exclusions. Those I traveled on appeared relatively new, in excellent condition, and mostly empty. Many Israelis and visitors who don't live on the West Bank shun them out of fear, as there have been some shootings there. My Israeli taxi driver from Jerusalem to Haifa earlier that week therefore asked me whether I minded going on such a road when the main road, inside the green line, seemed very crowded. He said it was a "little" dangerous - but much faster. My Arab taxi driver, from Acco (an Israeli citizen) back to Jerusalem, just took it without asking me. It certainly saved a lot of time.
2. Later there was some skepticism expressed about the Israeli academic community's sincerity in this regard. In

particular it was pointed out by one faculty member that there are very few Arabs on the science faculties of Israeli universities (less than half a dozen and none in Jerusalem) despite the fact that there are quite a few Israeli Arabs with Ph.D.'s from Israeli and foreign universities.

3. When I spoke about this with President Ziv of the Israeli Academy next day he said that while they cannot provide funding they are ready to cooperate in all other ways.
4. Ekland is in charge of a program of teaching undergraduates mathematics applied to economics, organized about three years ago by four Parisian universities. They send lecturers to Birzeit for a few weeks at a time and offer the Birzeit faculty visits to France equivalent to a total of two months per year. They also give some fellowships to students finishing the program. The program is supposed to be taken over fully by Birzeit this year. It appeared to be popular with students although it was not clear what jobs these students could get in the Palestinian areas at the present time.
5. See <http://www.math.rutgers.edu/~lebowitz>
6. According to Israeli sources many attacks by suicide bombers and car bombs are prevented by such checkpoints.
7. While waiting in line we saw some young men (students, others?) carrying rocks into the road near where the Israeli soldiers were standing to set up a barrier to prevent cars from speeding across. The Birzeit people in the car then said: "the soldiers were humiliating these young people". I didn't really understand what was going on.
8. On the plane returning from Israel via Paris I sat next to a young French fellow, Bruno Fert, who was returning from Ramallah and Birzeit, where he took photographs of young people for a book in a series "Being 20 in ...". He contrasted the quiet of Birzeit and the absence there of any posters of "martyrs" with the agitated atmosphere in Ramallah.