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Revisiting PEACE: Palestinian-European Academic Cooperation in Education and the Prospects for Revival

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Revisiting PEACE: Palestinian-European Academic Cooperation in Education and the Prospects for Revival

October 2026

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Abstract

This paper traces the history of PEACE (Palestinian European Academic Cooperation in Education), launched in Jerusalem in 1991 by twelve European and six Palestinian universities after Israeli military orders closed Palestinian universities during the first intifada. Grounded in the right to education, it was supported by UNESCO and the European Commission. After outlining Palestinian higher education's growth, the paper describes the Program's governance and membership of over seventy institutions. An-Najah National University, host of the 1996 Nablus conference, played an important role in promoting this cooperation. Activities evolved from emergency scholarships and fellowships toward institution building: administrative capacity, e-learning, UNESCO Chairs, and university consortia. Durable outcomes include Birzeit's Institute of Law, the MICAD master's at Bethlehem, and UNESCO Chairs in human rights at An-Najah. Occupation restrictions during the Second Intifada disrupted many projects, and PEACE closed in 2016. The paper documents the present crisis: withheld clearance revenues and economic collapse, a Knesset law devaluing Palestinian degrees, declining West Bank university applications, and the near-total destruction of Gaza's universities with heavy human losses, followed by a limited virtual restart. It assesses the Bologna Process, whose instruments reached Palestine through TEMPUS and Erasmus+, while a national qualifications framework and joint degrees remain missing. It concludes that cooperation survives adversity, that emergency aid must give way to lasting consortia, and that a revived PEACE should build double and joint graduate degrees on Bologna foundations.

Foreword by Professor Alessandro Reali, Rector of the University of Pavia

"I am happy and honored to write a brief introduction to this important contribution, that deals with the fundamental topic of the right to education and of its effectiveness even in the most difficult and troubled contexts. This paper moves from the history of the PEACE program in Palestine, of which the University of Pavia has been a proud and active participant throughout its 25-year duration, but aims at going even beyond it. In fact, the authors' authoritative reflection offers valuable insights into the lessons that can be drawn from that program, the most crucial of which is the following: University cooperation, especially with politically fragile regions such as Palestine, has to increasingly focus on forming consortia, stable in composition and duration, that are oriented towards the creation of double and joint degrees. The University of Pavia shares this approach and is committed to make the right to education for everyone a reality".



Alessandro Reali

Introduction

PEACE (Palestinian European Cooperation in Education) was a response to the closures most Palestinian universities suffered from during the first intifada. The political conditions on the ground implied that many young people in Palestine either could not pursue their studies or faced great difficulties in carrying on a regular academic activity. It is important to recall that Palestinian universities were still in the early years of their inception, and were trying to improve the curricula and to add new ones.

The PEACE initiative proved to be an extraordinary instrument for building inter-university cooperation not only between European and Palestinian universities, but also among European universities themselves. Moreover, the projects and programs proposed through PEACE were supposed to be open to other universities in the Middle East. PEACE was an attempt to provide opportunities to young people, by means of inter-institutional cooperation and thanks to the support received from UNESCO and from the European Union.

It is worth noticing that PEACE preceded and contributed to inspiring the 2002 TEMPUS MEDA European program, which is designed to extend to all Mediterranean countries the opportunities for academic exchanges and collaboration already existing inside the EU.

1. The establishment of Palestinian Universities and their growth

No university existed in Palestine before June 1967 when the West Bank was part of Jordan and the Gaza Strip was part of Egypt. Palestinian students from the West Bank attended Jordanian universities, but their enrollment became much more difficult, if not impossible, due to the occupation, which followed the 1967 Six-Day War[1]. During the 1970s some universities were established out of already existing schools and colleges. Bir Zeit University[2] near Ramallah in 1972,

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1 See Baramki G., Palestinian University Education and Occupation, *Palestine-Israel Journal* vol. III, N° 1.

[2] For a detailed story of the first years of Birzeit and of the several closures it suffered see Baramki 2010. The university suffered fifteen closures, with Israeli soldiers storming the campus. Dr. Baramki himself, at the time the Vice-Chancellor, was dragged from his home at night, beaten and arrested.

Bethlehem University in 1973, An-Najah National University in Nablus in 1977, Al-Quds and Gaza Islamic university in 1978. Hebron University opened in 1982 and in 1991, a second university was established in Gaza, Al-Azhar. Between 1985 and 1992 the PLO, Palestinian Liberation Organization, created Al-Quds Open University, first in Amman and then in Jerusalem.

During the final decades of the twentieth century the number of university students boomed; from few hundreds in 1972 to 36.000 in 1995-96, to almost 80.000 in 2003. There were almost 5.000 full time employees, with an important increase in the number of faculty members with masters and PhDs degrees.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century tertiary education in Palestine included 11 universities. Seven of them were located in the West Bank: An Najah National University and the American University of Jenin in the north, Bir Zeit University in the centre; three universities were located south of Jerusalem: Bethlehem University, Hebron and the Hebron Polytechnic. In Jerusalem there were Al Quds University and Al Quds Open University, which operated with thirteen centers throughout the Palestinian Territories. Then there were three universities in Gaza: Al Azhar, Gaza Islamic and Al-Aqsa.

High school graduates continued to increase during the following twenty years and in 2022 there were 22 universities in the West Bank, with approximately 226.000 students[3]. Before October 2023, Gaza had a substantial higher-education sector despite blockade, electricity shortages, restricted mobility, and limited internet access (Noairat et al., 2026). Nineteen recognized institutions—including universities, university colleges, and community colleges—served approximately 87,000–90,000 students across engineering, medicine, health sciences, education, business, IT, agriculture, and social sciences (UNESCO, 2025; Alarabeed, 2025). The largest institutions were Al-Azhar University–Gaza, the Islamic University of Gaza, Al-Aqsa University and Al-Quds Open University.

Palestinian higher education has also changed in kind, and not only in size. A system which in the nineteen-seventies offered almost nothing beyond the first degree now covers all three cycles. Master's degrees are awarded across the main institutions – An-Najah, Birzeit, Al-Quds, the Islamic University of Gaza, Al-Azhar Gaza, Bethlehem, Hebron, Palestine Polytechnic and the Arab American University are among them – and doctoral provision, which is much more recent, has been expanding since the mid-2010s. Its novelty is easily measured: the PhD in Nursing opened by the Arab American University in 2019, was the first programme of its kind in Palestine. Doctoral studies are now being placed on a national footing through the Palestinian Higher Degrees Committee, created with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and a group of Palestinian and European

[3] See the Appendix for more comprehensive data. We thank Luigi Bisceglia of Bethlehem University for providing these figures.

universities in order to bring the governance, supervision and quality assurance of all accredited PhD programmes into line with international standards.[4] Joint and double degrees with foreign universities, by contrast, remain the weakest link. Between 2014 and 2019 only one Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree selected for funding involved Palestine at all, and no Palestinian institution was ever a full, degree-awarding partner in such a programme. This is precisely the gap to which we return in the conclusions.

Most Palestinian universities are private, non-profit institutions, which perform a recognised public function. Their running costs are covered by student fees, donations from Arab countries, and by funds from the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Each university is administered by a Board of Trustees, the main policy-making body, and by a President, as the main executive, responsible for day-to-day management.

A Council of Higher Education was created in 1977 to assure management and coordination of the universities at the national level. With the establishment of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in mid-1996, the entire post-secondary education sector came under its responsibility. The Palestinian Conference of University Presidents assures consultation, cooperation, and coordination between the Ministry and the individual universities. From the very beginning universities aimed at high quality knowledge and research building and after the Oslo Accords of the mid 1990s they have been an important component of the process of institutional building towards a Palestinian state.

Since their inception Palestinian universities have been subject to frequent closures, sometimes as long as four months, due to orders of the Israeli military authority. The difficult conditions under which the Palestinian universities were established and the perpetual difficulties for staff and students to move freely explain the rather large number of universities for a population of five million people, their broad geographical dispersion, and the relatively low number of students of some of them.

2. The first intifada and PEACE Program

With the beginning of the first intifada in December 1987 the Palestinian universities were closed for long periods of time by military orders which were mainly justified as preemptive measures and not because of students' riots and demonstrations. Some universities found different off-campus places to resume teaching despite the bans of the occupation.

The decision to launch PEACE was taken in August 1991, at an international solidarity conference

[4] Programme-by-programme counts are published annually by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in its *Higher Education Statistical Yearbook* (www.mohe.pna.ps); on the national doctoral framework see the Palestinian Higher Degrees Committee, https://phdgov.ps. The Erasmus Mundus figures are from European Commission (2020).

convened by several European universities, members of the Coimbra Group. At a ceremony held in Jerusalem, on 1 November 1991, when most Palestinian universities had already been closed for two years, the rectors and presidents of twelve European universities (Barcelona, Coimbra, Granada, Krakow, Leiden, Leuven, Louvain, Namur, Pisa, Salamanca, Siena, and Viterbo) and their colleagues from six Palestinian universities (Al-Quds, An Najah National, Birzeit, Bethlehem, Gaza Islamic and Hebron), signed an agreement to officially launch the Program for Palestinian/European Academic Cooperation in Education (PEACE)[5].

PEACE was based on the principles of the right to education and the right to culture, as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960).

At its inception, the Program was supported by member universities and in particular by UNESCO and by the European Commission. Thanks to the encouragement of the then Director General of UNESCO Federico Mayor in 1995 an office of the PEACE Program was established at UNESCO headquarter in Paris, with dedicated personnel, which proved to be very important for the activities of PEACE, and another office was established in Ramallah, Palestine.

The Program membership grew steadily: 41 institutions in the mid-1990s, 55 by 1995/96 and 71 after the Nablus conference of 1996, of which 52 were still European universities in 2010, with large numbers from France, Italy and Belgium. Over the years there have been some oscillation in membership. All European participating universities contributed with membership fees and on top of fees member-universities contributed to the PEACE scholarship scheme, by taking over costs (totally or partially) for the Palestinian graduates and academics they received. There have been important contributions by European, national and local authorities and other sources of funds such as donations made by NGOs and foundations. It must be underlined that most of the funds originated from specific projects of university cooperation jointly prepared by European and Palestinian universities; this was an essential condition to apply for funding from the European Programs. PEACE was a great tool to mobilize these collaborations as we shall see in section 4.

PEACE was managed by a Steering Committee (SC), which included four representatives of Palestinian universities, among whom the Chairperson of the Program and the Treasurer were elected, and six representatives of European and American universities, who elected the Vice-chair and the Secretary General. Over the period 1996-2001 the Minister of Higher Education of the PNA served

[5] UNESCO Digital Library provides very useful information on the story and activities of the PEACE Program, see https://unesdoc.unesco.org/search/4f9dfec7-15aa-4e19-ab39-ba99fbafa292

as Chairperson of the Steering Committee. The SC used to meet a couple of times a year, quite often in Europe and at the UNESCO headquarter in Paris.

3. PEACE conferences and General Assemblies

PEACE organized several international conferences, in general every couple of years, in order to foster support for the Palestinian Higher Education Institutions. The first conference took place in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, on November 1994. The second conference was particularly important. It was organized in Nablus on November 1996 by An-Najah National University with the title *The Role of Higher Education in the Context of an Independent Palestinian State*. Prof. Rami Hamdallah, then the Vice President of Academic Affairs, played an important role in the organization of the conference.

It is clear that PEACE was moving in the spirit of the Oslo Accords, notwithstanding the fact that Yitzhak Rabin had already been assassinated a year before and that it was the period of the first Netanyahu government. The conference was opened by President Yasser Arafat and by the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Dr. Hanan Ashrawi. The conference was attended by more than two hundred international universities, all the Palestinian universities and some colleagues from Israeli universities were there. Three university consortia became members of PEACE: the Community of Mediterranean Universities (CUM), the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP), and the Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities (MUCIA). With the addition of new American members the acronym PEACE was now supposed to indicate: Palestinian/European/American Cooperation in Education, the denomination was changed back to the original in 2006. American universities were not particularly involved in the activities of PEACE, even if in many cases they supported individual Palestinian universities to re-organize some of their curricula in view of making them compatible with the equivalent American ones.

Conferences were supposed to take place every two years, with general assemblies in between. The disruptions of academic life during the Second Intifada made it impossible to organize conferences in Palestine and two conferences took place in Europe, in Ghent in 1999 and at UNESCO Paris in 2001. In February 2005 it was possible to have a second conference in Palestine, at Bethlehem University, which was also largely attended by European universities.

Following conferences took place in Europe: in Paris 2007 and in Barcelona in 2010, where the Keynote speaker was Federico Mayor, President of the Culture of PEACE Foundation, Co-Chair of the UN Alliance for Dialogue among Civilisations**.**

After 2010, the Program lost its status as a UNESCO program and it was closed in 2016. Nevertheless collaborations initiated through PEACE have continued until today.

4. Major activities of PEACE

From the very beginning inter-university cooperation was an essential component in all efforts to improve the quality of Palestinian higher education, from research activities to graduate studies, to institutional and staff development. The PEACE Program pursued these goals in a spirit of genuine academic solidarity, with the aspiration to make a contribution of its own to the peace process in the Middle East.

a. The first priority of PEACE was to implement a comprehensive **Staff Development Program and an internationally supported Fellowship Program** for Palestinian students and young academics in order to overcome the difficulties due to the closures of the period 1987-1991. This activity implied:

- Scholarships and grants for postgraduate students.
- Fellowships for Palestinian university teachers, to allow them to upgrade their capacities thanks to training abroad.

Between 1991 and 2010 the PEACE Program itself offered some one hundred and seventy grants, enabling Palestinian students and young academic to complete graduate studies abroad, leading to Master's or PhD degrees at European and American universities.

In addition, PEACE has facilitated the study abroad for a much larger number of Palestinian students who have received grants offered directly by individual universities, foundations and specialised agencies.

The PEACE Program provided assistance to activities which had been already initiated by UNESCO:

-The **PEACE/AAB Pilot Project for Palestine,** to be implemented within the framework of the new UNESCO initiative "Academics Across Borders" (AAB);

-TOKTEN for Palestine. UNESCO launched a TOKTEN Project (Transfer of Knowledge though Expatriate Nationals). PEACE helped to revive the project, through the numerous Palestinian academics already holding teaching and research positions at universities in Europe, North America and other regions.

However, it was immediately clear that these were sort of 'emergency measures' and that more structured activities were needed to reinforce the functioning of Palestinian universities.

b. Therefore a second endeavour regarded the **strengthening of administrative capacities at Palestinian universities.** The Palestinian colleagues asked for support in setting up mechanisms of evaluation and accreditation of programs and institutions and in the training of senior university administrators in higher education planning, management, and financing.

An essential component of this second type of activities concerned the development of E-Learning and other kinds of ICT-based teaching and learning methods. This helped Palestinian institutions to cope with the increasing number of applications and to raise the quality of programs through close links with universities abroad. Equally important distance learning helped to surmount the persistent difficulties created by the repeated closures of academic institutions and the obstacles to free movement of faculty members and of students. Based on these considerations and on the experience acquired through the Avicenna Project, already existing at UNESCO, in building up a virtual e-learning space in the Mediterranean, PEACE proposed the elaboration of an **Avicenna Project for Palestine**, and the establishment of an Avicenna Knowledge Centre at Al Quds Open University.

c. The establishment of some **UNESCO/UNITWIN chairs** in Palestine was another important tool of improvement in university teaching and research capacities. A UNESCO Chair in **Archaeology** was launched in April 1995, serving several Palestinian universities – Al-Quds, Birzeit, An-Najah and Bethlehem – and was reinforced by seven PEACE member universities, which sent experts to teach and to carry out research and funded five grants for Palestinian postgraduates and young academics. The parallel initiative in **Foreign Languages** also went through. A Foreign Language Resource Centre was established at Al-Quds University, and by the 1995/96 academic year, it was running intensive courses for Palestinian students preparing to study abroad, while five European language teachers had been seconded to strengthen the language programmes of the Palestinian universities; UNESCO reported in 1997 that the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs activities in archaeology and in languages were both continuing. Neither Chair, however, appears in UNESCO's current list of Chairs and Networks, so both lapsed at some later point.[6] A UNESCO Chair in **Human Rights, Democracy, and Peace** was established at An-Najah National University in 1997 and was meant to promote studies and research in these areas at all Palestinian universities. It is the one Chair of that first generation which is still active today.

There were also initiatives which could not be completed. This was the case of the establishment of an international chair devoted to **Marine Science** in Gaza, which could have played an important role in the training and research program of the Palestinian Centre for Marine Environment and Resources, to be established in Gaza. Unfortunately the project did not go through.

A similar case was that of the UNESCO Chair on **Teacher Training and New Technologies of Education in Palestine,** which was meant to further strengthen teaching activities at Palestinian

[6] UNESCO (1996) and UNESCO (1997). The five Chairs currently active in Palestine – at An-Najah (1997 and 2019), Birzeit (2006), the Islamic University of Gaza (2012) and the Arab American University (2022) – are listed in UNESCO (2025, April 18). In 2015 a UNESCO UNITWIN Network on International Cooperation and Development was initiated between the Universities of Bethlehem and Pavia and it is still working.

universities (point **b.** above). This chair was supposed to act as the focal point and catalyst for developing e-learning and ICT capacities at Palestinian universities and to provide technical support and serve as a resource of expertise for the educational authorities in charge of the training of teachers in Palestine, from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to other central and local authorities. The Chair itself was never established and it appears in no UNESCO list of Chairs and Networks. PEACE nonetheless pursued the same objective by other means: from 2008, it associated its member universities with the Palestinian Teacher Education Strategy launched with the support of UNESCO and the European Commission, set up a consortium of member universities to assist that work, and financed doctoral training in education for Palestinian academics.[7]

d. More steps were taken in view of having a structured inter-university cooperation between European and Palestinian universities. PEACE did encourage the setting up of **consortia of member universities**, capable to launch, to secure funding and to implement large-scale academic projects, in order to support one or several Palestinian universities in developing programs in specific academic fields. Here are some selected examples:

- ***Laws Studies Centre*** at Birzeit University (supported by a consortium of 5 European universities).
- ***Water Resources and Marine Science,*** a project funded mainly by the Flemish Government, (through a UNESCO Project).
- ***Applied Mathematics in Economics*** at Bir Zeit University, a project launched by a consortium of 5 French universities, with the financial support of the French authorities.
- At Bir Zeit there was a plan initiated by Augsburg University for ***Establishing a Center of Excellence in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics*** in order to train students in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics up to PhD level.
- ***A Refugee Studies Centre*** at An-Najah National University, which should have functioned within the framework of an international network supported by UNESCO.
- ***A Joint Master Program in International Cooperation and Development and Innovation in Palestine.*** A project initiated by the Universities of Pavia and Siena in Italy and then joined by Radboud University of Nijmegen, University College Dublin, the Institut Universitaire d'Etudes sur le Development of Geneva, all members of PEACE. The program was supposed to be shared by three Palestinian universities: An-Najah, Bir Zeit and Bethlehem.

Although the focus of all these initiatives was on Palestinian students, the idea was that they should have been open to all the young people from the Middle East. Some of these consortia benefited from

[7] Chitoran (2010).

funding by the European Commission through TEMPUS Projects and PEACE greatly facilitated the presentation of these projects.

Some of these initiatives proved remarkably durable, and it is worth recording which of them survived, since they are the concrete evidence that this way of working produces lasting institutions rather than temporary projects.

The *Law Studies Centre* at Birzeit became the Institute of Law and is still operating. It opened an MA programme in 1996, put the Al-Muqtafi legal database online in 2000, and in 2003 gave rise to a full Faculty of Law and Public Administration – so the work on law and public administration listed below among the interrupted projects was in fact carried through at Birzeit itself, even though it could not be extended to the other universities as originally planned. The Institute continues to build new international partnerships today.

The plan initiated by Augsburg University for a *Centre of Excellence in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics* at Birzeit succeeded and was institutionalised: a UNESCO Chair in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics was established at Birzeit in 2006, with a supporting network set up in 2007 to act as its focal point. The Chair is still active and is currently held by Professor Wafaa Khater.

The *Joint Master Programme in International Cooperation and Development* became MICAD, which opened at Bethlehem University in 2005 and has run without interruption since. It has itself become an export: since 2024 the University of Pavia and Bethlehem University have been working with five Libyan universities to adapt the MICAD model to Libya.

The work on *water resources* had a mixed fate. The Gaza water research centre was approved in 1997 with funding of some US$540,000 from the Flemish Community of Belgium, but the field in Palestine is now represented above all by the UNESCO Chair on Sustainable Water Resources Management established at An-Najah in 2019. The *Applied Mathematics in Economics* project at Birzeit and the *Refugee Studies Centre* at An-Najah did not survive as consortium projects, although An-Najah's Academic Program for the Study of Involuntary Migration, created in 1994, covers much of the same ground.[8]

5. The second intifada, 2000-2005, and the disruption of many activities

Following September 2000 and the starting of the Second Intifada, many of the programs which had already been initiated through PEACE were in great difficulties. First, inter-university collaboration, also between Palestinian universities themselves and in particular between universities in the West Bank and in Gaza, became more complicated, if not impossible. Second, it was no longer viable to

[8] Chitoran (2010); UNESCO (1997); UNESCO (2025, April 18); and the institutional records of Birzeit University and Bethlehem University.

extend the collaborations intended to be opportunities for Palestinian students to other young people from the Middle East,.

Notwithstanding these difficulties PEACE activities continued and it was also possible to have a conference in Bethlehem in 2005, as we have seen. Some projects could be restructured, this is the case of the Master in International Cooperation and Development, MICAD which opened in 2005 at Bethlehem University and it is still running. Unfortunately similar programs could not start at An-Najah and Bir Zeit. Other projects had to be interrupted and some project proposals could not be implemented, below are some examples:

- Master Course on Mathematics in Economics, carried out by a consortium of Parisian universities, with the support of the French government.
- Projects for developing studies in Law and Public Administration at Palestinian universities, based on work done by the Law Studies Centre at Birzeit University.
- Water Resources Management in Gaza.
- Microelectronics and Computer Science, which was a recognized priority for many Palestinian universities.[9]

Since 2004 the major preoccupation of the Steering Committees of PEACE was that of resuming Academic Projects that either had been interrupted or could not be launched. This was also the main topic of the 6th Joint UNESCO/Palestinian Authority Committee on Higher Education of July 2004.

Notwithstanding these attempts from 2010 onwards, the PEACE Program lost prime as a network of European and Palestinian universities. Several collaborations between some universities in Europe and a university in Palestine are still going on despite the growing difficulties, but the possibility to create consortia and to present projects for funding them became more and more limited. In 2016 the PEACE Program at UNESCO was closed.

The years between the Barcelona conference and the closure of the Programme are thinly documented, but the outline is clear enough. In 2010 PEACE was still a functioning network of 64 members, 52 European and 12 Palestinian universities, chaired by Professor Radwan Barakat of Hebron University with Professor Frédéric Ogée of the Université Paris-Diderot as Vice-President. Its scholarship scheme, by then the main line of action of the Programme, had supported some 170 Palestinian postgraduates and young academics since 1991 and was running at close to thirty grantees a year, and PEACE had begun to use the European mobility schemes directly: an Erasmus Mundus project coordinated by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, approved in 2007, was renewed in 2010.

[9] The documentation available to us does not identify the university which was to host this project; the records of the PEACE Programme held in the UNESCO Digital Library would need to be consulted on this point.

The last major outcome came two years later. In 2010 PEACE had proposed, with the International Astronomical Union and several of its member universities, to develop teaching and research in astronomy at Al-Aqsa University in Gaza. On 10 July 2012 the UNESCO Chair in Astronomy, Astrophysics and Space Sciences was inaugurated in Gaza, shared by the Islamic University of Gaza, Al-Aqsa University and Al-Azhar University, with Dr Suleiman Baraka as chairholder. It remains on UNESCO's list of active Chairs today, and it is the clearest demonstration that the PEACE method still worked in the 2010s: an idea raised at a general assembly, carried by a consortium, and ending as a permanent institution.[10]

After 2012, however, PEACE disappears from UNESCO's regular reporting on Palestinian educational institutions. No further international conference followed Barcelona, the Programme lost its status as a UNESCO programme, and the office in Paris was closed in 2016.

6. Universities in Palestine in 2026

Since October 2023 the situation on the ground has been deteriorating more and more and Palestinian universities have great troubles in operating. The conditions in the West Bank and in Gaza are unprecedented in the history of the conflict. In the case of the Gaza Strip there have been major physical destructions of universities.

A general problem has to do with the economic crisis, which followed the October 2023 events and had a major impact on Palestinian families. Between 2023 and 2024 the Palestinian economy contracted by almost 23%, following a brief recovery after the COVID 19 crisis (see IMF and World Bank data for West Bank and Gaza)[11].

Another cause of the financial difficulties is due to the fact that, contrary to what was agreed on in the Oslo Accords of the mid-1990s, Israel does not transfer to the PA the customs and value-added taxes that Israel collects in its name, known as clearance payments. The partial withholding of this money dates back to 2019 and it was used to punish the PA which paid allowances to the families of prisoners held by Israel. After October 2023 this measure was implemented in a most severe way and since May 2025 the money transfer has completely stopped; these payments accounted for about two-thirds of the PA's revenues. This fact has huge implications in a society in which around one hundred and thirty thousand people are employed by the central and local governments; all these people now receive only part of their salaries. Families have almost no possibilities to pay for university fees and

[10] Chitoran (2010) and UNESCO (2012).

[11] The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis gives even a worse picture: for the West Bank and Gaza the variation of the Gross Domestic Product in Constant Prices shows a decrease of more than 30% of the 2024 figure on the 2022 one (see https://fred.stlouisfed.org/data/WBGNGDPRPCHPT?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

this of course puts an enormous stress on universities' finances. All universities are trying to cope with issues of lack of regular fees payment either granting huge discounts, or introducing a system for diluting the payments. In particular, students already enrolled are given the possibility to delay payments for a long period. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education is providing some financial support to the students whose parents are public employees.

The occupation is becoming more and more violent in the West Bank and another major difficulty is a law passed by the Knesset on January 2026: "Law Preventing the Employment of a Teaching Employee Who Has an Academic Degree from an Institution in the Palestinian Authority (Legislative Amendments), 2026", which amends the State Education Law. This implies that a graduate who has an "an academic degree from a higher education institution in the Palestinian Authority" is considered as "someone who does not have the academic degree required for employment as a teaching employee in Israel". The impossibility to be hired as teacher includes schools in East Jerusalem, even schools where teaching language is Arabic. In East Jerusalem there are almost 7.000 teachers and at least 60% of those teachers have a bachelor's degree from a Palestinian University[12]. The impossibility to use the educational degree is an important limitation on job opportunities and it discourages applications[13].

On top of that, in the West Bank there is an increasing number of check-points, which together with settlers' attacks make the mobility of staff and students difficult and dangerous. Three years of these conditions have led to a decrease in the number of applications in the range of twenty per cent in the universities of the West Bank. Almost forty years after the first intifada, another entire generation of young Palestinian girls and boys might not be able to access and complete higher education.

Notwithstanding all these difficulties Palestinian universities are managing to carry on and to coordinate their activities in a coordinated way. The **Council of Presidents** meets regularly under the chair of the Minister of Education and Higher Education; these are mainly online meetings, in which there are also the Presidents of Gaza Universities. Universities in the West Bank make all efforts to favour participation of students to classes and to have face-to-face teaching. Security reasons during the periods of the most intense conflict between Iran and Israel-US required the adoption of more online teaching, but all universities agreed that exams would be only in presence. Universities are also trying to keep the graduation events according to schedule.

[12] According to international law and the Oslo Accords East Jerusalem is not part of Israel, but is regarded as Occupied Palestinian Territory, OPT, very much like the West Bank and Gaza. Starting with 2026 most schools in East Jerusalem will adopt the Israeli teaching curriculum (Hasson 2026).

[13] Faculties of education make up an important share of applicants in many universities in the West Bank, notably Bethlehem.

Universities in the West Bank face two major challenges. The first problem is that continuing the academic activities of the already running programs, and the decline in the number of applications could create enormous problems even in carrying on the already existing activities. The second issue regards the development of new programs and in general of new activities which have been drastically influenced: the opening of new courses, the improvements of graduate studies, of master and PhD programs, the collaboration with foreign universities undergo severe difficulties. Planning for future improvements is becoming very difficult, contrary to a tradition which dates back to the nineteen-seventies and to the years of the PEACE Programs.

7. Destruction and Academic Losses in Gaza

Since October 2023, Gaza's higher-education system has faced what scholars describe as "scholasticide": the systematic destruction of educational institutions, resources, and human capacity (Desai et al., 2025; Alarabeed W. 2025, United Nations 2024). A 2025 joint assessment found that 95% of university campuses were damaged or destroyed. Of 38 campuses, 22 were completely destroyed and 14 damaged; 195 of 206 assessed university buildings were destroyed or severely damaged and could not operate (UNESCO, 2025).

Estimated damage to higher-education infrastructure is approximately USD 373 million. For Gaza's wider education sector, estimated recovery and reconstruction needs reached USD 4.71 billion by April 2026 (UNESCO, 2025; World Bank, EU, UN, 2026).

The human cost has been equally severe. By the end of 2025, PCBS reported 18,863 student deaths in Gaza, including 1,399 university students. Other reports estimate that 1,261–1,399 university students were killed and at least 2,671 injured (PCBS, 2026).

Higher-education staff have also been heavily affected. At least 226 academics and university staff were reported killed by mid-2025, while PCBS later reported 241 higher-education employees killed in Gaza. A UNESCO-backed assessment found that 1,112 of 5,102 higher-education staff were killed, detained, or injured (UNESCO, 2025; OHCHR, 2026). Approximately 88,000 students experienced interrupted study and lost the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years (UNESCO, 2025). Repeated displacement, bereavement, poverty, lack of devices, and unreliable power and internet have further restricted learning[14].

Since late 2025, universities have begun a limited restart through the Gaza Virtual Campus, Temporary Learning Spaces, and blended-learning provision (UNESCO, 2025, Times of Palestine, 2026). Launched with UNESCO support in October 2025, the Gaza Virtual Campus provides a shared

[14] A study found that 92.7% of surveyed students and academics had experienced forced displacement and 89.3% reported severe effects on their research (Various authors 2026).

digital platform through which universities can offer courses, assignments, assessments, and selected degree programmes. Its first phase was designed to support 20,000 higher-education students, although this represents only a proportion of the approximately 88,000 students whose studies were interrupted (UNESCO, 2025). Temporary Learning Spaces provide computers, connectivity, basic facilities, and psychosocial support for students who lack safe study environments or personal devices. By August 2026, five higher-education learning spaces were serving approximately 13,800 students, including 6,912 women, while Gaza Virtual Campus support was expected to expand to more than 30,000 students (UNESCO, 2026).

West Bank Universities, offered some help to students in Gaza through offering virtual teaching classes, supervising and examining graduate students. An-Najah University created a liaison office which offered opportunities for students to attend online classes with their mates at An-Najah.

Some universities in Gaza, however, have also resumed limited face-to-face teaching through surviving buildings, temporary facilities, and hybrid learning arrangements. However, online provision cannot fully replace laboratory, clinical, technical, engineering, and other practice-based training requiring equipment, supervision, and safe physical learning spaces (UNESCO, 2025). Gaza's universities therefore continue to operate in a fragile survival mode. The emerging hybrid model reaches only part of the affected student population and remains constrained by damaged infrastructure, staff losses, displacement, funding shortages, insecurity, and restrictions on movement (UNESCO, 2026). Priorities include restoring campuses, laboratories, libraries, digital systems, student-support services, faculty capacity, and safe access to learning spaces (UNESCO, 2026). Without durable security, freedom of movement, sustained financing, and protection of educational institutions, emergency measures will remain vulnerable and incomplete[15].

8. The Bologna Process

The reform movement in Europe launched by the Bologna Declaration of 1999 (the Bologna Process, BP) offered a different kind of help, and one that arrived just as PEACE was at its most active. Its instruments – the three-cycle bachelor–master–doctorate structure, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement and a common approach to quality assurance – were designed to make degrees readable across borders, and readability is exactly what a system as isolated as the Palestinian one needed. The possibility of converting ECTS credits into the credit-hour system that Palestinian universities follow made student and staff mobility

[15] A broader view about the possible reconstruction of Gaza is in Giampaolo and Giannotta 2026.

administratively feasible, and Palestinian universities benefited from the exchange programmes that came with it.

The influence, however, travelled mainly through the European Union's cooperation programmes rather than through membership of the Bologna structures themselves. Palestine is not a signatory of the Bologna Process and does not belong to the European Higher Education Area. What reached Palestinian universities reached them through TEMPUS and, after 2014, through Erasmus+ – the same consortium-based projects that PEACE had done so much to make possible. Through them Palestinian universities updated their syllabi, revised their assessment methods and strengthened their quality assurance standards, a process given an institutional anchor in 2002 with the creation of the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission (AQAC), the national accreditation body, without whose approval no new programme or institution may operate. Curricula were restructured in several fields in the light of BP recommendations, and joint programme design with European partners – the joint MSc in Electrical Engineering developed by three Palestinian universities is one example – became a recognised method of curriculum reform.[16]

Two pieces of the Bologna architecture are still missing in Palestine, and both matter for what follows. The first is a national qualifications framework: one has been drafted but it has never been legally established and is not operational, so Palestinian qualifications cannot be formally referenced to any European level descriptors. The second is the third cycle, where a national framework for doctoral governance has only now begun to take shape through the Palestinian Higher Degrees Committee. Until these are in place, recognition of Palestinian degrees abroad will continue to be settled institution by institution rather than by rule, and genuine joint degrees will remain difficult to construct.

An-Najah National University introduced a new programme in Applied Chemistry designed in the light of BP recommendations, with a study plan built around learning outcomes and a credit load intended to be readable in ECTS terms; the University currently describes it as a three-year degree.

9. Conclusions

The PEACE program took off during the early phases of the Oslo Accords even if in an independent manner, recall the Madrid Conference of 1991 which opened the way to Oslo. The Oslo process was supposed to lead to a permanent solution of the conflict between Israel and Palestinian people. An

[16] On AQAC and the Palestinian quality assurance system see the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission, Ministry of Education and Higher Education; on the absence of an operational national qualifications framework see European Training Foundation (2023); on Palestinian participation in Erasmus+ see European Commission (2020).

essential component of the agreements was the establishment of a Palestinian Authority, PA, which implied the formation of the administrative structures needed for the functioning of a country, including all the relevant ministries and also local organizations. PEACE contributed to this process of institution building, in particular between 1995 and 2006. This was possible because of the collaboration between European and Palestinian universities and the coordination of the Minister of Education and of Higher Education of the PA, even if all the initiatives concerning the preparation and the management of projects and programs rested with the partner universities. As we have seen things became more difficult with the second intifada and also with the 2007 conflict between Hamas and Fatah in Gaza.

The PEACE Program experience can teach a few lessons. First, however complicated the political situation might be this does not prevent inter-university cooperation. Indeed a lot of programs initiated through PEACE have led to a cooperation between European and Palestinian universities which is still going on. Because of the Gaza tragedy (see section 7) many European universities have undertaken initiatives to help Gaza university students to complete their higher education abroad, in particular by offering scholarships. There are also opportunities for scholars and young academics to spend periods of research and teaching at European universities[17].

A second lesson which can be drawn from the experience of PEACE is that the above activities are extremely important, but they represent a first emergency intervention, an attempt to mitigate some of the most extreme effects of the disruptions undergone by academic life. The story of PEACE is a story of partnerships which started with more immediate assistance, because of the closures of the first intifada, but then moved on with the fostering of consortia which could generate long-lasting academic cooperation commitments. This process should be re-started and updated.

Thirty-five years from the beginning of the PEACE Program, academic life in Palestine faces enormous challenges with terrible impacts on a new generation of young Palestinians. However, all these decades have not elapsed in vain. With all their difficulties, and the enormous destructions in Gaza, Palestinian universities have many more human capabilities than forty years ago. Staff is excellent, many universities have graduate courses taught in English and they aim for PhD programs, there are important research collaborations with international universities.

[17] An example is the program IUPALS (Italian Universities for Palestinian Students), coordinated by the Conference of Italian University Rectors, CRUI and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to help Palestinian student from Gaza to carry on their university career. The program saw the participation of 35 Italian universities, providing full scholarships for BA and MA courses. There were 165 applications and 120 actual arrivals. Unfortunately, the program lasted only one academic year and was closed in February 2026 because of the restrictions in the ‘evacuations’ from Gaza decided by Israel.

Setting up university consortia is still a necessary and useful step, but we have to look further, to new tools of university cooperation, also taking advantage of the experiences of European universities. **Double degrees** and possibly the more ambitious **joint programs**, in particular **joint graduate degrees,** between European, American, International and Palestinian universities could be very important instruments to create long-term academic cooperation between Palestinian universities and universities abroad. Many Palestinian universities are already working for the accreditation of their programs in the American system. Double and joint degrees denote a further challenge and they represent a long-term strategic investment and commitment. International institutions such as UNESCO and the EU could support these activities.

A third lesson concerns the instruments of cooperation themselves, and here the experience of the Bologna Process discussed in section 8 has to be brought into the argument. The reform of European higher education gave Palestinian universities something PEACE alone could not: a common grammar. The three-cycle structure, ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and a shared approach to quality assurance made it possible to compare a Palestinian degree with a European one, and that comparability is the precondition of every form of cooperation described in this paper. Credit transfer is what turned good intentions about mobility into functioning exchanges; the diffusion of quality assurance practice, consolidated nationally in the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission of 2002, is what allowed Palestinian programmes to be taken seriously by partners abroad. It is no accident that the PEACE projects which survived – MICAD, the Institute of Law, the Chair in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics – are all projects that produced accredited, comparable academic qualifications rather than one-off exchanges.

But the Bologna experience also shows how much of the work is unfinished, and it is this that gives the proposal of double and joint degrees its urgency. Palestine is not part of the European Higher Education Area; its national qualifications framework has been drafted but never brought into force; and its doctoral programmes are only now acquiring a common governance framework. The consequence is visible in the figures: between 2014 and 2019 a single Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree selected for funding involved Palestine, and no Palestinian institution has ever been a full, degree-awarding partner in one. Palestinian universities have absorbed the Bologna instruments without yet being able to use them for the purpose those instruments exist to serve, which is the joint award of degrees.[18]

This is why double degrees, and the more ambitious joint programmes, are not simply one good idea among others. They are the point at which the two histories told in this paper converge. PEACE

[18] European Commission (2020); European Training Foundation (2023).

showed that consortia of European and Palestinian universities can be built and can last; Bologna supplied the technical language in which the degrees they award can be made mutually recognisable. A revived PEACE would have both of those assets available to it from the first day, which its founders in 1991 did not. Completing the qualifications framework, consolidating the national doctoral system and then building joint graduate degrees on that base would convert three decades of European–Palestinian cooperation into something that no closure, no checkpoint and no funding cycle can easily undo: degrees jointly owned by universities on both sides. International institutions such as UNESCO and the EU are well placed to support exactly this step.

In the end, the right to education is a fundamental human right, to deny it to generations of young people is deeply unjust and could lead to desperation, humiliation and social distress. Giving a chance to the girls and boys of Palestine to pursue their own dream trough tertiary education is a fulfillment of the above right. More than that, it is an opportunity for a generation and for a country to have a chance to contribute to build for a future, of hope, of dialogue, of justice and of PEACE in the entire Middle East.

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Appendix Universities in Palestine in the academic year 2022-23

	University	City	Region	Ownership type
1	Al-Azhar University – Gaza	Gaza City	Gaza Strip	Public
2	Islamic University of Gaza	Gaza City	Gaza Strip	Public
3	Al-Aqsa University	Gaza City	Gaza Strip	Public
4	Gaza University	Al Zahra City	Gaza Strip	Private
5	Palestine University	Gaza City	Gaza Strip	Private
6	University of Palestine	Al Zahra City	Gaza Strip	Private
7	Israa University	Gaza	Gaza Strip	Private
8	Arab Open University – Palestine	Multiple campuses	West Bank and Gaza	Open university.
9	An-Najah National University	Nablus	West Bank	Public
10	Birzeit University	Birzeit	West Bank	Non-profit
11	Al-Quds University	Abu Dis	West Bank / Jerusalem area	Public
12	Al-Quds Open University	Multiple campuses	West Bank and Gaza	Open university
13	Arab American University	Jenin	West Bank	For-profit
14	Bethlehem University	Bethlehem	West Bank	Non-profit
15	Palestine Ahliya University	Bethlehem	West Bank	Private
16	Palestine Polytechnic University	Hebron	West Bank	Non-profit
17	Hebron University	Hebron	West Bank	Public
18	Palestine Technical University – Kadoorie	Tulkarem	West Bank	Public
19	Al-Istiqlal University	Jericho	West Bank	Public
20	Al-Zaytoonah University of Science and Technology	Not specified in source	West Bank	Private

	University	City	Region	Ownership type
21	Dar Al-Kalima University of Arts and Culture	Bethlehem	West Bank	Private
22	Nablus University for Vocational and Technical Education	Nablus	West Bank	Public

Sources: Ministry of Education and Higher Education https://www.mohe.pna.ps/Higher-Education/Institutions/Universities and https://www.unirank.org/ps/a-z/ and https://www.unirank.org/ps/a-z/

During the academic year 2021/2022, a total of 225,975 students were enrolled in Palestinian higher education institutions. The largest enrollment remains in Health & Welfare (51,673 students, 22.9%) and Business Administration & Law (56,018 students, 24.8%). In Scientific faculties there are 29,964 students, representing about 13.3% of the total higher education enrollment. (Data are from Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, PCBS, and other official sources).

Recent data collection has been severely impacted by the ongoing conflict. According to PCBS, approximately 88,000 students were enrolled in higher education institutions in the Gaza Strip in 2022/2023, but current data collection has been disrupted due to the ongoing aggression since October 7, 2023.