

After Brandeis and Syracuse, a US school decides to stay with Al-Quds

Bard College in New York has announced it will continue its partnership despite rally held by Islamic Jihad at Al-Quds.

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The US university with the closest ties to Al-Quds University, Bard College in New York, has announced it will continue its partnership, despite two other American colleges severing ties with the Palestinian school.

The decision by Bard – announced late on Friday in a statement to The Jerusalem Post – came only days after Brandeis University and Syracuse University formally ended their ties with Al-Quds, after a rally held by Islamic Jihad on the Al-Quds campus, which its president, Sari Nusseibeh, did not initially condemn.

In the days following Brandeis's decision to end its ties with Al-Quds, divisions have emerged on the Massachusetts school's campus about whether the university overreacted to images from the protest, which showed people in military garb trampling on Israeli flags near posters of suicide bombers.

The protesters held up their right hands in a Nazi-style salute, but observers have pointed out that such a salute does not necessarily connote Nazi allegiance.

Bard's connection to Al-Quds is substantially different than Brandeis's. While Brandeis's partnership had deteriorated over the years due to funding problems, Bard maintains active joint-degree programs.

After news broke of the rally, Brandeis publicly called on Al-Quds to condemn the protest, while Bard remained silent on the issue until asked for comment more than two weeks later.

School officials said Al-Quds has held private conversations with officials from both Brandeis and Bard in the past few weeks.

Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, wrote in a statement that the Al-Quds administration contacted Bard "immediately" after the rally and "provided an unequivocal denunciation of that protest," and Bard decided not to publicly address the issue.

Brandeis officials stated that its president, Fred Lawrence, contacted Nusseibeh “immediately” and requested an “unequivocal condemnation.”

On November 11, Lawrence announced in a blog post that Al-Quds “assures us that threat of violence implied by the demonstration [is] not acceptable on their campus and the university administration is conducting a full investigation.”

Still, Brandeis called for a public response from Al-Quds.

Nusseibeh’s response came in a November 17 letter to students, written in Arabic and English, which was forwarded to Brandeis administrators.

“The university is often subjected to vilification campaigns by Jewish extremists with the purpose of discrediting its reputation as a prestigious academic institution with a unique, humane calling,” Nusseibeh’s letter said.

“Some people capitalize on events in ways that misrepresent the university as promoting inhumane, anti-Semitic, fascist and Nazi ideologies.

Without these ideologies there would not have been the massacre of the Jewish people in Europe; without the massacre, there would not have been the enduring Palestinian catastrophe.”

But the letter also alluded to the limits of free expression.

Nusseibeh explained that the school hopes to instill “a message against hatred, against violence, against extremism, and also a message to make use of reason in every way and make reason dominant over passionate outbursts and to keep passion contained in the breast.”

The 800-word letter outraged the president of Brandeis and the Anti-Defamation League, which on Friday issued a strongly worded statement condemning Nusseibeh’s comments.

Bard read the message, and subsequent public discussion, differently.

“Suggestions that the university administration condoned the actions of a very small group of students within a university of 12,000 are simply inaccurate,” Botstein wrote in his statement, noting that “the incident and the ensuing controversy demonstrate that it is more important than ever to maintain our educational partnership with Al-Quds.”

Brandeis reinforced its decision to sever all ties at the end of last week when it suspended Nusseibeh from the International Advisory Board on the Brandeis International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life.

Dan Terris, a Brandeis professor closely involved with the partnership, had a scheduled trip to Al-Quds in the days following the protest, and was asked by Lawrence to investigate the circumstances of the protest.

In a blog post about his observations, Terris stopped short of explicitly criticizing Brandeis's decision, nevertheless saying that "nothing that we have learned during this period has changed our conviction – built over many years of experience – that Sari Nusseibeh and the Al-Quds University leadership are genuinely committed to peace and mutual respect."

Mohammed Dajan Daoudi, a prominent Al-Quds professor who founded the school's American Studies program, said the dispute revolves around a difference of perspective.

In an open letter posted to the American Studies Facebook page, Daoudi said that when he sees students demonstrating, he sees "disappointment, frustration, despair, anger, all combined together in a militaristic march protesting the dire present Palestinian political and economic conditions."

He added that "I did not see anything Nazi about that salute."

The events of the past week have surprised even one of the top American scholars on higher education institutions' overseas expansions.

Kevin Kinser, the chair of the department of educational administration and policy studies at the University at Albany, State University of New York, said the decision to fully sever ties between universities is extremely rare. He also said he was surprised by Bard's decision not to criticize Al-Quds's actions.

"It's the kind of thing that you don't see that often; for a US institution to take that kind of principled stand against a partnership with another institution," he said, adding that the Nazi-style of the salutes is a "fairly extreme event that also ties directly to the foundation of Brandeis as originally a Jewish university."

When notified of the Bard response, Kinser wrote in an email that "I would have expected a more forceful rejection of the protest itself. Bard seems to be positioning its academic programs to serve as a focal point for continuing dialogue and resisting the labeling of the protests as reflective of broader and perhaps insurmountable cultural differences."

Link: <http://www.jpost.com/International/After-Brandeis-and-Syracuse-a-US-school-decides-to-stay-with-Al-Quds-332891>