

# Libraries, Archives, and Palestine

## The Struggle Continues

**W**e complete the editing of issue #48 of *Progressive Librarian* as 2020 draws to a close. In many ways, it has been an awful year. The COVID-19 pandemic has overshadowed everything, claiming nearly two million lives worldwide and impacting especially the elderly, the poor, and communities of color. In the United States, the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and a seemingly endless list of other unarmed Black people has horrified and sickened the nation and the world. A plague of natural disasters generated by the climate change denied by our government has continued to spread and to ravage our planet. The list goes on . . .

But these events are only part of the picture; there have also been important positive developments. The selfless work of medical professionals and researchers offers promise in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid growth of a powerful movement against racism, led by a new generation of Black activists, has begun to transform U.S. politics. There has been the electoral repudiation of a racist, authoritarian, plutocratic demagogue. And although there is still immense uncertainty about the intentions and capabilities of the incoming administration, there are now renewed opportunities for struggle by advocates of social justice, including progressive librarians.

Amid so many struggles, a thread of optimism runs throughout this issue. Each contribution addresses significant challenges. But each also suggests or documents a path forward.

For this special issue we invited Palestinian librarians, archivists, and other information providers to share their expertise on the general topic of “Palestinian libraries and archives under Israeli rule.” Our hope was to provide the opportunity for our Palestinian colleagues to speak directly to readers of *PL*, and for readers of *PL* to hear directly from them. Specifically, we sought “historical or analytical

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studies of how the occupation or a particular Israeli policy has made it difficult to provide information;” “papers describing the experiences of the author or authors in confronting these problems;” and “papers describing current efforts to create libraries and archives.”

The contributions presented here address all these topics. Included are five pieces by four authors; of these, three authors are from the West Bank and one is from Gaza. These contributions all describe the overwhelming difficulties associated with the provision of information in the occupied territories, but they also offer inspiring stories about how Palestinians are coping with these problems.

Focusing on the period from Israel’s founding to the creation of the Palestinian National Authority, our first article by Anan Hamad provides a historical review of the impact of Israel’s colonial settler project on Palestinian libraries. This account includes painful descriptions of the mass looting of personal libraries; restrictions on the import of books; censorship; and the confiscation of books, periodicals, and documents. But Hamad also writes of the construction of new Palestinian libraries and of the continuing preservation of Palestine’s rich cultural heritage in the older libraries of Jerusalem.

Mary Fasheh’s and Mosab Abu Toha’s contributions contain heartbreaking accounts of the more recent Israeli assaults upon, and the continuing siege of, Gaza and how these have impacted libraries. Nevertheless, the overall tone of both Fasheh and Toha is remarkably optimistic. Mary Fasheh describes the impressive work of IBBY Palestine in a range of activities that includes the rebuilding of destroyed libraries and the organizing of workshops for librarians and children. And Mosab Abu Toha speaks proudly of the establishment of two libraries as part of the Edward Said Public Library and of the many services they have provided, including programs for traumatized children. *PL* readers who would like to help either IBBY Palestine or the Edward Said Public Library are encouraged to contribute through the links provided in the articles.

Lara Kanaan’s article touches on a different challenge: the indifference of too many Palestinians to the fate of sometimes priceless family libraries they have inherited. Kanaan ends on a somber note. But hope is embedded in her article, too, in her description of the gifting of collections by some families to public and university libraries.

While the remainder of our issue does not deal specifically with Palestinian libraries, the four documents and report are related in their commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusion:

Our first document, a statement issued by the Middle East Librarians Association (MELA), addresses the special challenges created by COVID-19 to collection development, equity, and access to materials related to the Middle East, North Africa, and their diasporas. At a

time when the pandemic is encouraging libraries to rely ever more heavily on electronic acquisition, MELA rightly warns that such shifts threaten the diversity of library collections, the continued operation of small regional vendors, and access outside of a handful of privileged institutions to research materials related to the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

Our second and third documents are products of the recent discussion with the American Library Association (ALA) regarding a resolution submitted by the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) defending the free speech of supporters of the movement for Palestinian rights. Not surprisingly, the resolution was defeated overwhelmingly by ALA Council, which has consistently opposed resolutions related to Palestine. Since then, more states have adopted laws targeting advocacy for Palestinian rights, bringing the current number of states with such legislation to 30.<sup>2</sup> But the good news is that recent opinion polls cited in Document 3 show a substantial majority of people in the U.S., unlike ALA Council, support the free speech rights of the movement for Palestinian rights, while a significant and growing minority supports the movement itself.

The powerful new movement against racism is represented by our fourth document, a Progressive Librarians Guild list of “Resources in Black Lives Matter.” It contains statements and links to statements of support for the movement by individuals and organizations of library and information workers; links to resource guides to becoming anti-racists personally, professionally, and within our communities; and links to resources focusing on demands to defund and demilitarize police forces and to abolish carceral practices and institutions.

Our final piece, the “Union Library Workers” blog compiled and edited by Craig Guild, reports the impressive range of union activity internationally in libraries, archives, and the information sector in 2019–2020. Especially noteworthy is the coverage of a wave of strikes and unionization efforts in response to cuts in pay, benefits,

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<sup>1</sup> See also related statements by other library organizations: the Committee on South Asian Libraries and Documentation (CONSALD), <http://www.consald.org/covid.html>; the Council on East Asian Libraries (CEAL), [https://www.eastasianlib.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CEAL\\_Statement\\_COVID-19\\_FINAL\\_2020.8.13.pdf](https://www.eastasianlib.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CEAL_Statement_COVID-19_FINAL_2020.8.13.pdf); and the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM) <https://salalm.org/salalm-resolution-collection-development-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>.

<sup>2</sup> See “Palestine Legal: Legislation: <https://legislation.palestinelegal.org/>.” SRRT’s International Responsibilities Task Force has posted a webpage, “Anti-BDS Legislation: The Library Connection,” that lists ALA policies violated by this legislation and links to many library-related contracts, etc. that contain explicit state-mandated prohibitions on boycotts of Israel. <http://www.ala.org/rt/srrt/irtf/anti-bds-legislation-library-connection#libraries>.

and services, the international strikes in September 2019 for action against climate change, the impact of COVID-19 on library workers, and the Black Lives Matter protests and statements following the murder of George Floyd.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue support the understanding *Progressive Librarian* and the Progressive Librarians Guild have held since their founding that, even in difficult times, our hope lies in collective struggle. As the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish reminded us, “As long as the struggle continues, the paradise is not lost but remains occupied and subject to being regained.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Darwish, Mahmoud. *Journal of an Ordinary Grief*. New York: Archipelago Books, 2010, p. 8.