

American librarians visit Gaza strip

Their libraries are improving, but they still have a long way to go

by R. N. Sharma

A delegation of American librarians, including the author, Ron Chepesiuk, head of special collections at Rock Hill University in South Carolina, and Fouad El-Harazin, president of the Gaza Governorate International Foundation, visited the Gaza Strip from November 10–18, 1997, on a fact-finding mission to explore the needs of libraries. The trip was authorized by the International Relations Committee of the ALA. Gaza Strip is one of the world's most historic places, situated on the east coast of the Mediterranean. It is also one of the most densely populated areas in the world. In addition, 46 percent of the population in the Gaza and West Bank areas is under the age of 15.

Library facilities

There are 22 academic institutions in Palestine. None of the institutions have adequate library facilities. Alazhar University in Gaza, with over 11,000 students, has only 1,500

books and lacks journals and technology. The College of Education in Gaza has 2,600 students on three campuses, but has only 22,000 books and two librarians to serve them. Some of the reference books in these collections are 20 to 30 years old and no recent editions or titles are available. One English professor told me, "It is frustrating and depressing to come to the library."

The Islamic University in Gaza has the best library facilities available. There are 80,000 books and journals, limited microfilm collection

and technology, and three professional librarians to serve 6,000 students. There are no school, public, or special libraries (with the exception of British Council, French, and Diana Tamari Sabbagh libraries) to serve students and the general public. There are no library schools, no collection policies to develop collections, no national library, and no library associations in Palestine. The delegation met officials of the Ministry of Education, deans, presidents, librarians, the spe-



R. N. Sharma (left) with Palestinian leader President Yasir Arafat in Gaza.

About the author

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cial advisor to the president on education, and President Yasir Arafat. All officials stressed the need to develop libraries for the benefit of children, young adults, and other citizens of this new, emerging nation. The officials of the Ministry of Education informed us of a plan in order to fully develop their education system.

Looking ahead

For the first time in the history of the nation, money has been allocated for all schools, colleges, and university libraries. Palestinians also visited the United States to become acquainted with our efficient education and library system. According to the plans, all libraries will be linked to the Internet in the near future. Plans have been made for the National Library, which will be completed in the year 2000, if funding is available.

Salim Arafat El Mobayed has been appointed as the first national librarian to carry out the plan. The library will have five floors, which will house manuscripts, books, journals, conference hall, state-of-the-art technology, and a museum. The total cost of the project will be approximately \$28 million.

The delegation firmly believes that Gaza Strip/West Bank institutions need books, journals, technology, and proper guidance to develop their libraries. A few nations, including Canada, England, France, India, Italy, Japan, Northern Ireland, and a few Arab nations have already donated books and given financial aid. The European Community has given \$3.3 million, and a few foundations in the United States, including Project Hope, International Text Book Program, and Sabre Foundation have sent books to Palestine libraries recently. The limited improvement of libraries during the last two years has been credited to Abu Daya, dean of College of Education in Gaza City, who has been instrumental in turning the situation around due to his excellent vision for libraries. Nevertheless, further help, guidance, and aid are needed to develop the libraries.

President Arafat stated to the delegation, "We are the highest educated people in the Arab world . . . out of every 1,000 people eighteen have master's and/or Ph.D. degrees. We need books; we need journals; we need technology to build the future of our children and the nation. All help will be appreciated." ■

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