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# A semester in Palestine: volunteering in Birzeit University main library

*John T Maguire*

**John T Maguire is a Canberra librarian who took leave from employment to study and work as a volunteer librarian at Birzeit University in Palestine. The university library, work undertaken and organisation of the placement are described. Comment is also made on the role of information technology in libraries.**

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**L**IBRARIES ARE AN ESSENTIAL RESOURCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRESERVATION of cultures and societies. Sharing in the advancement of another society is an exciting activity that gives the opportunity to learn about the culture you are visiting and better understand that of your own country. Furthermore, skills that are regarded as ordinary in economically developed countries hold an additional value and significance in developing economies.

January 1999 saw me arrive with some trepidation in Palestine to spend one semester at Birzeit University as an international student. Having taken leave from my employment I was keen to immerse myself in another culture through study and work. The Palestinian and Arabic Studies Program for international students at Birzeit University provided the opportunity to undertake volunteer work in addition to classes. I arranged with the library to work twenty hours per week in technical services for four months, a period of time that was long enough to benefit the library yet short enough to not dislocate my life. I found the convenience of a brief stay preferable to volunteering for a number of years with an international aid agency.

Palestine is situated in the eastern Mediterranean and its borders and political control have constantly changed throughout history. The borders of the modern state of Israel were created at the end of the Israel-Arab War (1948–49) with the West Bank being annexed by Jordan. As a consequence of the 1967 Six Day War Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. To this day relations continue to be strained, a situation that is difficult for both communities. Apart from a very long pre-flight interview and luggage search by Israeli airline security, I did not have any unpleasant experiences. This was in

part due to my understanding of social and political conditions and staying aware of developments on a daily basis. However, at least once a week I had to show my passport at Israeli military checkpoints, an experience with which I never felt comfortable. And my visit took place during a time of relative calm.

The Oslo Peace Process has been implemented since 1994 to enable a graduated provision of Palestinian autonomy, though substantial delays have occurred. Presently the land is divided into three types of areas. In 'A' areas Palestinians control both administration and security; 'B' areas are Palestinian-administered with Israeli security; and 'C' areas have total Israeli control. Birzeit University is in a 'B' area. It is situated in the West Bank, about eighteen kilometres north of Jerusalem. The university was founded as a school in 1924 and today has over 4000 students. All are ethnic Arabs and mostly Muslims, with a Christian minority. In addition, each semester a number of international students attend as part of the PAS Program. Arabic is the official language with English as a secondary teaching language. The 'Yusuf Ahmed Alghanim' library building was constructed in 1985 with funds donated by a Kuwaiti business. The four-floor library holds approximately 100 000 volumes, with seventy per cent in English and thirty per cent in Arabic and since 1979 the library has also been a depository for UNESCO publications. A small collection of rare and historic publications about Palestine is also held, and is especially significant in the absence of a Palestinian national library:

My work consisted mostly of original and copy cataloguing of new English language acquisitions, including some rare books about Palestine. I also assisted with selecting monographs for purchase, something that had not been done for ten years due to funding shortages. For the previous decade the few new books acquired were through an established international donation scheme that still operates. Double import taxation of books by both the Israeli and Palestinian administrations poses an additional ongoing financial burden.

The library catalogue is operated by effective but ageing software and can be searched in either English or Arabic. Personal computers can be used by students to search the internet and are also available elsewhere in the university. It is noteworthy that in the nearby village of Birzeit and the town of Ramallah there are several internet cafés, showing how ubiquitous information technology has become throughout the world. This also suggests that any comparative productivity increases gained by institutions that are the first to use a new development will be short lived. Rather, sustained advantages are likely to go those libraries with the best service delivery programs and trained staff supported by new technology.

Because of limited Palestinian resources, I did a lot of research at the Jewish National and University Library at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This is something few local students can do, because it is illegal for most Palestinians to enter Jerusalem because freedom of movement is restricted by law. I enjoyed researching at the National Library and was amused when a couple of users assumed I was a Hebrew-speaking librarian and asked for help. When I told them I only spoke English, they phrased their requests in English. From time spent there and at the Hebrew University Library at Mt Scopus and Tel Aviv University Library I was able to fully appreciate the magnitude of economic privation in Palestine. Birzeit University is a very modestly resourced institution, with other Palestinian university campuses I visited in the West Bank and Gaza

faring even worse. Israeli higher education institutions and libraries are comparatively well funded but lack the degree of electronic resources present in their Australian counterparts.

The seventeen weeks I spent in Palestine were perhaps the most intense I have experienced. They were also very exciting, enjoyable and worthwhile both personally and professionally. In closing, I would like to thank the staff of the library for their hospitality and assistance during my stay. More information about Birzeit University, including the book donation scheme, can be found on its web page at: <http://www.birzeit.edu> or the library web page at: <http://www.birzeit.edu/library>.

# ***The Australian Library Journal:* refereeing policy — a clarification**

We have recently been made aware that DETYA requires that articles should be refereed by persons who are not members of the relevant journal's editorial board, that is, by independent peers. This in fact, has been this journal's policy since the practice of refereeing was introduced in 1996.