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Introduction

IN MID-SEPTEMBER 1982, as they invaded West Beirut, Israeli forces raided a high-rise on Colombani Street in the Lebanese capital. Though the building belonged to the Palestine Liberation Organization, it contained neither militants nor weapons. Instead, the Israeli soldiers discovered, and quickly seized, a library—a library teeming with books about Jews, Zionism, and Israel.

This library was the jewel of the Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, an arm of the PLO founded in Beirut in February 1965, just months after the establishment of the organization itself. Over its nearly two decades of activity in Beirut, the Research Center's mission was to study *alqadiyya al-filastiniyya*, the "Palestine question," and to increase knowledge about "the enemy."¹ It did so through the concerted efforts of researchers who produced hundreds of books, pamphlets, and journal issues in Arabic and other languages. Through books the Center published with titles such as *The Zionist Idea, State and Religion in Israel, The Kibbutz, The Moshav, The Histadrut, Mapai, Mapam, Israel and World Jewry, David Ben-Gurion, The Talmud and Zionism, and Discrimination against Eastern Jews in Israel, the Center's leaders provided intellectual resources for Palestinian and other Arab readers to better understand Israel's history and ideological underpinnings.² The Center investigated other matters as well, but one of its prime areas of focus comprised Jews, Judaism, Zionism, and Israel.*

The story of the PLO Research Center did not end with its library's confiscation in September 1982. Unlike the thousands of books Israel seized from Arab libraries in the 1948 war that sit until today in the National Library of Israel,³ the PLO Research Center's library was, by all accounts, mostly returned. And quickly. In November 1983, Israel and the PLO negotiated a prisoner swap through the International Committee of the Red Cross. In exchange for the PLO's release of six Israeli soldiers it held captive in Lebanon, Israel

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agreed to free more than four thousand Arab prisoners—and the PLO Research Center library. Air France planes arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport to transport one thousand of the freed Arab prisoners to Algeria and, as they boarded the planes, the IDF loaded crates filled with books into the cargo sections beneath.

Reading Herzl in Beirut tells the story of the institution that created this library, the researchers who used it, the scholarship they produced in it, and the events that led to its confiscation and return. In telling this story, the book explores the role played by knowledge in the development of politics and by politics in the production and distribution of knowledge in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Israel's seizure of the PLO Research Center was—and in historical memory remains—overshadowed by other events that transpired contemporaneously as Israel invaded West Beirut. Israel captured the PLO Research Center during the very days in September 1982 when a Lebanese Christian militia allied with Israel massacred hundreds of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, a massacre for which Israel's own commission of inquiry declared Israeli officials "indirectly responsible."⁴ In a week when hundreds of people, including many women and children, are slaughtered, it is hard to notice, much less to recall, anything else.

Beyond the particular timing of these events, there is a broader reason why many in the West have never heard of the Center and its research output: the Center does not fit neatly into any of the dominant perceptions of the PLO. Among those who remember the organization in its heyday, common associations with the PLO might range from freedom fighters, embattled nationalist heroes, bold or ambivalent peacemakers to corrupt bureaucrats, gun-toting hijackers, or merciless terrorists. The variety of associations is wide, but would not typically include prolific researchers of Judaism, Zionism, and Israel. Yet, one official wing of the PLO consisted of precisely such individuals. If today, four decades after its period of intensive activity in Beirut, the PLO Research Center is largely forgotten, it may be because few have a political interest in remembering it.

Leaving aside such interests, however, the PLO Research Center, from its founding through its conquest and beyond, merits our attention. The war that Palestinians and their allies were waging against Israel had many fronts. Arab state militaries and Palestinian guerrillas, no doubt, played key roles in the broad effort to defeat Israel but the pen joined the sword in this war—and

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considering Israel's increasingly clear military superiority over the Arab states, Palestinian activists and supporters took very seriously the potential power of the pen. If the chances of defeating Israel on the battlefield were slim, perhaps Israel could be undermined through rhetorical and intellectual challenges to its legitimacy. To undertake such challenges, some believed, one had first to develop a deeper understanding of the object of the challenge. The PLO Research Center's studies of Jews, Judaism, Zionism, and Israel thus proved crucial for Palestinian nationalist endeavors.

As the PLO Research Center's motivation in studying Jewish and Zionist history was to "know the enemy," it is not surprising that the authors generally related in an antagonistic way to the subjects of their research. But, as we shall see, there are also subtle hints in the Center's publications of an interest not only in combatting but also in emulating certain aspects of their objects of study. In any case, the Center's scholars took their jobs seriously. Whether in their writings for an internal Palestinian and Arab audience or in those for an external Western audience, these university-educated researchers employed scholarly sources and academic methods. In this sense, the story of the PLO Research Center constitutes an important chapter in Palestinian intellectual history.

Odd as it may sound, the PLO Research Center may be regarded as having been a pioneer in the field of Israel studies. The founding of the Center preceded by a full two decades that of the Association for Israel Studies (AIS). If Israel studies is defined as the study of the State of Israel and its origins, and "is open to all individuals who are engaged in, or share an interest in, scholarly inquiry about the State and society of Israel," regardless of "citizenship, nationality, religion, or political orientation,"⁵ much of what the PLO Research Center did in its years in Beirut qualifies. In fact, many of the research questions that the Center asked—for example, about the relationship between Judaism and Zionism, ethnicity and gender in Israel, or colonialism and violence participated in the scholarly discourse on these matters. Some of the conclusions that the Center's authors drew heralded future trends in the field of Israel studies.

An examination of the PLO Research Center is thus not only a study in Palestinian intellectual history but also in Jewish and Israeli history. Moreover, Jews from Israel and abroad were at various times and in different ways connected to the work of the Center (and ultimately, to its demise). Jewish authors appear prominently in the footnotes and bibliographies of the Center's publications and, in certain instances, Jewish scholars and activists were part of the

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Center's intellectual life not only as subjects but also participants. Like the story of the Palestinian people since the rise of Zionism, the Center's story is deeply intertwined with that of Jews and Zionism. (The reverse is no less true, of course, as the history of the Jews and Israel has been, since the rise of Zionism, profoundly enmeshed with that of the Palestinians.) This book, then, is also a story of intellectual and personal encounter—generally adversarial though occasionally collaborative—among Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Jews.

The PLO Research Center also presents us with a fascinating case study of the fraught relationship between scholarship and politics. The Center was at once an official arm of a militant nationalist organization with a clear political agenda and an institution dedicated to objective research. Notably, while the PLO was not, in principle, opposed to propagandistic efforts, its propaganda was meant to be conducted by other entities within the organization.⁶ In this book, I explore the bidirectionality of influence between the Center's ideology and its research.

Though this book focuses on an institution run by a handful of local intellectuals housed in an ordinary building in a medium-sized city in a small Middle Eastern country, it also tells a global story. The PLO Research Center was founded by the PLO, itself the creation of the Arab League, and it continued to be funded by the Palestine National Fund, the Arab League, and individual Arab governments. From its inception, the Center was implicated in a regional network of states and interests, which themselves evolved over the course of the Center's lifetime in Beirut. In addition, the Center's intended audience was both local and global, and included Arabic and non-Arabic readers alike. This book thus considers the broader intellectual community and interlocutors who shaped the scholarship of the Center. It also reflects on the Center's impact on the PLO political leadership's decision to engage in global diplomacy.⁷

While the story of the Research Center has been largely forgotten, as I was writing this book, I learned of several fellow scholars who have also become interested in different aspects of the Center. These scholars of archives, libraries, and film have made important contributions from which my own research has benefited. Digital humanities scholar Jacqueline Bader Husary, in her thesis "Recovering the PLO Research Center: Limits and Potential for Digital Methods to Retrieve Dispersed Archives," used technological tools to mine online library catalogues to "locat[e] the Research Center traces that survive in libraries across the world." Through this sophisticated research, Husary pro-

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duced a fifteen-page bibliography of the Research Center's publications in its Beirut years.⁸ Two other scholars have been particularly interested in the episode of Israel's wartime capture of the Center's collections. In an article entitled "The Paper Trail of a Liberation Movement," archivist and historian Hana Sleiman argued that Israel's seizure of the PLO's institutional archives held by the PLO Research Center constituted neither the first nor the last period of "captivity" of these archival materials. Rather, Sleiman contended provocatively, the archive's "first captor" was the PLO Research Center itself while, after Israel returned the materials in 1983, "the Palestinian statebuilding enterprise" became "its current captor."9 Rona Sela, a scholar of art history, portrayed the 1982 conquest of the Research Center, as well as the films from the PLO's Cultural Arts Section, as examples of "colonial plundering/looting of cultural and historical treasures and archives and their administration and dominance in military colonial archives."¹⁰ Two documentaries, Looted and Hidden by Sela and Shalal—A Reel War by Karnit Mandel, have recently been released, focusing especially on the films the Research Center had collected.¹¹ This book thus joins in a budding rediscovery of the PLO Research Center in Beirut.

The chapters that follow are divided into three parts, each motivated by certain driving questions. In part 1, as I recount the history and work of the Research Center between 1965 and 1982, I ask what led the PLO to devote substantial resources and talent to an in-depth investigation and presentation of Judaism, Zionism, and Israel, and what drew the Center's leadership to this enterprise. In part 2, I analyze in detail a number of publications on a variety of topics that the PLO Research Center produced, and I ask how the Center's researchers undertook their work and what conclusions they drew. In part 3, I inquire into what happened to the Center and its library after its confiscation in 1982 and ask whether we might be able to discern the Center's impact on the development of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The PLO Research Center played an important role in the history of the PLO, in Palestinian intellectual history, and in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its global perceptions. Studying the Center's research yields insights about the PLO, its intellectuals, and its perspectives on Judaism, Zionism, and Israel. The story of the PLO Research Center in Beirut is thus a crucial piece of Palestinian history, Israeli history, and the history of the conflict.

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