

issam nassar

*Bayt al-Maqdas:
The Fahmi al-Ansari
Library*

Jerusalem has a long and rich history of private family libraries. As a divided city with practically no governmental institutions catering to its Palestinian residents, the city lacks some of the basic cultural services available in most other cities. One area in particular in which such deficiency can be felt is that of public libraries. In a city filled with research centers and historical archives, few, if any, libraries can be found that cater to the Palestinian general public. In such a context, family libraries and book collectors have often offered an important alternative to the general readership.

The *Bayt al-Maqdas* - located at 7 Omar Ibn al-As Street between Nablus Road and Salah al-Din Street - is one such private library. In 1957 its founder and owner, Fahmi al-Ansari, placed his collection of books at the disposal of the general readers of Arabic in Jerusalem. His library came to replace an older family library that had had been burnt in 1938.

The library contains a collection of over thirty thousand books in Arabic on a variety of topics. Most of them were printed sometime between 1950 and 1980, with a few of them dating back to the 1930s. Of special interest is Mr. Ansari's collection of books on Jerusalem that, according to him, includes all the books that have been printed in Arabic on the city since the

founding of the library. Al-Ansari library does not contain any archival materials, except for an impressive collection of Palestinian newspapers that date back to as early as 1948. According to Mr. Al-Ansari the collection contains all daily papers published in Palestine since 1967. And, as he maintains, the goal of the library is to collect all periodicals that have been published in Arabic since the nineteenth century. Mr. Al-Ansari is proud of his collection of 1876 copies of the Beirut-based periodical *al-Jinan*.

The library does not possess a cataloguing system. In order to find a book, the visitor must ask Mr. Al-Ansari or look through a long roster of titles. Titles are not organized alphabetically or by subject but are listed following the order in which the books are kept on the shelves. Thus, there is a list with all 2693 books on shelf number one, another one with the 5166 titles on shelf number two and so forth. As one can easily imagine, it is rather difficult to depend on the listing. Due to lack of space, Mr. Al-Ansari's collection of newspapers is no longer accessible to the general public but is rather kept in a storage room.

The patrons of the library are mostly students - especially from the schools of Jerusalem. However, specialized scholars may find this place useful for its collection of

newspapers and of books on Jerusalem. Despite its modest collection, this library has something very special to offer to book lovers in general. It is Mr. Al-Ansari's obvious pride in his collection. In this rapidly changing country, which is nowadays filled with billboards advertising all kinds of merchandise, book collectors are becoming a rarity. Mr. Al-Ansari's face shows that same profound enchantment expressed by all book lovers when they display their precious collection to a passerby. He knows exactly where each one of his books is and is able to offer the most detailed information about the content of most of them. This retired educator serves as the library's on line computer or card catalogue. At the mention of a subject, he goes from one shelf to the next and brings out all relevant books in his collection. Indeed, Mr. al-Ansari, knows each of one of the more than thirty thousand titles that constitute his personal collection.

Al-Ansari library opens from 8 a.m. until 3 p.m. every day except Fridays. Patrons can photocopy any material they might need, but, unfortunately, can not borrow books.

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