



The Looted Archives of the Orient House

During the early morning hours of August 10, 2001, the Israeli police raided the Orient House. They closed its offices, along with nine other Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, in a retaliatory response to the previous day's Palestinian suicide attack in which 15 Israelis were killed.

This act was seen both locally and internationally as an Israeli escalation of the conflict more drastic than the bombardment of Palestinian cities, and even the assassination of military and political figures in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) areas - and for good reason.

The Orient House constituted the main and, until this summer, only representation of Palestinian political institutions in the city. In this capacity, it was recognized by all the international powers involved in the peace negotiations since the Madrid conference in 1991. Moreover, the Israeli government had underwritten this legitimacy in the letter of

assurances sent by then Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to his Norwegian counterpart, the late Johan Jurgen Holst, on October 11th, 1993.

Speaking for the Israeli government, Peres assured the world that it confirmed the "great importance" of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem and that "[Israel would] not hamper their activity." These assurances, like the terms of the Oslo Accords, are binding under international law on all subsequent Israeli governments.

That is why, when the Likud government, under Prime Minister Netanyahu, attempted to close the Orient House a few years ago, the United States and the Europeans reminded Israel that such an act would constitute a breach of contract and be a grave violation of the terms of the Oslo Accords. Subsequently, the Israeli government refrained from carrying out its threats to interfere with Palestinian activities in the city. However, such protestations seem to have less influence on the Sharon Government and its Labor allies. Even Peres - occupying the same post as he did in 1993 - seems oblivious to his role in this violation of internationally signed agreements.

Undoubtedly, the PNA played a shortsighted role in the continued closure of the Orient House by delaying the appointment of a successor to Faisal al-Husseini, holder of the PLO Jerusalem File, after his untimely death this summer. Strikingly, the current protests, both Palestinian and international, have concentrated mainly on the political and diplomatic violation of the Orient House, to the neglect of the acts of piracy involving

the removal of irreplaceable research documents and other valuables - items that have no bearing on the political status of Jerusalem and certainly not on Israeli security.

Items confiscated by the Israeli government included personal belongings, confidential information relating to the Jerusalem issue, and documents referring as far back as the 1991 Madrid conference. Even the office of the late Faisal al-Husseini was completely emptied. Impounded under the pretext of "security," the archives contain numerous documents and files that are integral to future development strategies for East Jerusalem and to the assistance of Palestinian negotiators.

The Israeli government's arrogant assertion of power does not change the reality that, since 1967, Jerusalem has been a divided city with its Palestinian population predominantly serviced by the Orient House and other PLO institutions. However, although initial condemnation of Sharon's latest attempt to eliminate the PNA's presence in Jerusalem was widely heard, now - nearly a month since the Israeli take-over - public protestations are but a distant memory.

Aside from the much-mooted political theories that lie behind Sharon's manoeuvre, what then is the significance of the looting? In part, this issue's photo essay, which highlights the Arab Studies Society photography collection located in the Orient House building, provides an answer. This collection - also pillaged from the Orient House - represents a unique record of Jerusalem's ethno-graphic relations among its 19th and 20th century population. Although

its theft is unlikely to arouse anger as long as people remain unaware of its significance or even of its existence, it is an irreplaceable and invaluable archive.

One cannot forget Israel's record with stolen documents. During the 1948 War, several private collections of books and manuscripts were looted by the Haganah militia, and never returned (cf. John Rose, *Armenians of Jerusalem*, 1995). Several of those collections, including the private papers of Khalil al-Sakakini, ended up in the library of the Hebrew University.

In 1982, as the PLO evacuated Beirut, Israeli forces sequestered the Palestine Research Center's entire archive, which consisted of some 25,000 volumes in Arabic, Hebrew, and French and served as a depository of Palestine's historical, political, and cultural heritage. Two years later, in 1983, following international pressure, the Israelis returned the archival collection - minus the film collection - to the Palestinians, who subsequently moved it to Cyprus.

Looting of national archives is not a new phenomenon, and similar acts - albeit on a larger scale - have occurred throughout history, including during many 20th century wars. However, in this case, there are two important differences: this pillage occurred despite a signed agreement between the two opposing sides; and it occurred under conditions of military occupation rather than war.

