

FOREWORD

In a 1995 interview, the iconic Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish said: “Palestinian poetry has, for little less than a decade, become conscious of the necessity of humanizing its themes and passing from Palestine as a topic or an object, to Palestinian as subject.” This ontological shift in poetry also holds true, I believe, for shifts in the political imagination, in institution building, and in knowledge production. The establishment in 1979 of the first Palestinian human rights organization, Law in the Service of Man (later known as al-Haq), is a prime example. The change in focus from Palestine to Palestinian is evident in the name itself. “Man” (writ large, but male nonnormative, nonetheless) became the subject on three levels: the individual, the collective (Palestinians as a political community), and the human (universal citizen with inalienable rights).

Al-Haq’s founders dared to reimagine politics by initially taking a “nonpolitical” stance in defense of the “rule of law.” This, in itself, is not highly unusual, until one is reminded that they did so in the context of a dominant nationalist political culture that saw itself as leading the struggle against a settler colonial project which steals Palestinian land and builds Israeli Jewish colonies while incarcerating Palestinians and brutally repressing them. As the first Palestinian organization of its kind and one of the earliest in the Middle East and the world, al-Haq had an outsized influence locally, regionally, and internationally in terms of its innovative forms of self-governance and methods of data collection, seasoned by working under the very difficult long-term conditions of foreign military rule. In its reports and published self-reflections, al-Haq produced insightful forms of knowledge about the external pressures on and internal contradictions of the Palestinian condition. The rise and inevitable crises experienced by al-Haq, especially after

the 1993 Oslo Accords, have profound lessons to teach all of us about the forms of political mobilization that are opened and foreclosed by human rights frameworks, and about how the Palestinians' experience enriches our understanding of larger global trends in struggles for justice, equality, and freedom.

Scholars have recognized the importance of al-Haq, but Lynn Welchman's intimate "insider/outsider" positionality and unparalleled access to sources and people make this book the definitive and most compelling study. Her elegant and tightly structured writing have yielded a page-turning book that humanizes, so to speak, this human rights work. Moreover, her professional expertise on law and society issues provides the analytical scaffolding that links this bottom-up view to larger international issues and debates.

By looking at the world through the eyes of Palestinian legal activists, Welchman's book contributes to the mission of the *New Directions in Palestinian Studies* (NDPS) book series. Among other things, the series seeks rigorous works of scholarship that center the Palestinian experience, introduce new narratives and actors, and utilize locally generated vernacular sources. NDPS values justice-centered academic works that, at the same time, do not shy away from critical analysis of internal problems. One of the important dimensions of Welchman's book is her judicious and honest account of the conflicts—political, personal, institutional, and ideological—which rocked al-Haq, especially after the tragedy of the Oslo Accords and the failures of the Palestinian Authority came into full view. In hindsight, these conflicts were inevitable considering the historical moment of al-Haq's formation, which straddled third-worldist anticolonial worldviews concerned with social and economic development and a universalist liberal conceptual vocabulary concerned with international law and human rights. Welchman's book, therefore, offers a prehistory of human rights work that globalizes the Palestinian experience.

In focusing on Palestinians and the discourse of human rights more than on Palestine and the discourse of national liberation, al-Haq was, in many ways, ahead of its time. It inspired the formation of dozens of similar organizations, became an incubator of legal activists, and anticipated the rise of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. Palestinians are the canary in the mine for many of this world's most pressing challenges, and Welchman's in-depth and textured study of al-Haq is rich with insights about the possibilities and limits of making universal human rights a central arena of struggle, and a welcome intervention in long-running debates about the relationship between law, social movements, and political power.

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