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Library Undergraduate Research Award Reflective Essay

When I began my honors thesis in the Spring of 2018, I did not know where my research would lead me. I began with the intent of studying the Lebanese Civil War and American intervention therein. As I began to do research, I found that I truly wanted to write about what came after the war, the “peace process.” This was motivated by Edward Said and his lamenting of the very usage of the term “peace process” when no such thing exists in this context. His influence would guide me over the next twelve months of research, leading me to many other questions that I would pursue through the UW library.

As a student of the history of the modern Middle East, I was well aware of Edward Said’s standing in the field. I had read his seminal work, *Orientalism*, but I knew that this was only a start, so I began by amassing books from UW library, from accounts of the Lebanese Civil War to Said’s *Peace and its Discontents*, a collection of essays on Oslo. When I got to the latter, it reoriented my focus and provided me with a road map for future research. This book alerted me to the ultimate central figures of my research, Dennis Ross and Martin Indyk. I was also struck by the way in which Said criticized the Palestinians, his compatriots, and I felt it necessary to likewise focus my criticism on the United States. After deciding on a topic, I was able to further checkout and read secondary literature from the library, but I had not yet fully arrived at my thesis.

At first I wanted to focus on the preliminary negotiations for Oslo, the Madrid Conference (1991). I felt that if I could find candid discussions between American diplomats, I could elucidate why the negotiations broke down (and blame the Americans). However, I quickly found out that this would not be possible, and this forced me to readjust. Given the recency of the topic, most of relevant documents are still classified; I had to move on from

government documents to public testimonies. This is much harder, but I learned that with respect to the modern history of the Middle East, there is a large number of public sources, including memoirs, and when one reads these sources critically, they are rich primary sources.

Furthermore, in hindsight I have realized that my entire approach was flawed. I was being too cynical and believed that if I could find the classified documents, I would find a smoking gun. After reading memoirs, it is apparent to me that historical actors tend to believe what they are saying, and that a historian must give them the benefit of the doubt while corroborating and contextualizing their claims.

This left me in a precarious position. In my paper I am critical of Orientalists for subscribing to historicism, the belief that historians are the gatekeepers of historical fact. I wanted to avoid their tendencies, but I also had to place the accounts of Ross and Indyk (and the *New York Times*) in proper context. In attempting to do so I found that there is actually a remarkably coherent narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as documented by *Israeli* historians, the “new historians.” While it remains difficult to objectively understand the past, I will continue to use these historians, namely Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and Meron Benvenisti, to guide my research.

The research that led me to these conclusions would not have been possible but for the UW library and librarians. While I checked out an extensive number of books, I found that the library had much more to offer. For example, when I was researching *NYT* articles, I sought help from Ms. Jessica Albano. She taught me which database to use and how to search more efficiently by using an asterisk to allow for different endings of a word (e.g. Palestin* to find Palestine and Palestinian). I also met with Ms. Emily Keller who helped me research liberal American think tanks, especially the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. As she admitted

to me, finding a database for these was quite difficult, and her assistance in doing so was indispensable. Ms. Cassandra Hartnett also assisted my research, as she had done for previous projects. Although I diverted from the idea of focusing on government documents, it was imperative for me to discern whether citations in secondary literature could be corroborated. This came up in an essay by Edward Said, and Ms. Hartnett helped me to contact the National Archives in D.C. to attempt to retrieve a copy of a Senate hearing (I was unsuccessful, but it was important to know whether it was possible). Furthermore, on the two occasions I was unable to find a book in the UW library, ILL proved to be a helpful resource. I was able to retrieve a copy of the third edition of Sara Roy's *The Political Economy of de-Development*, a landmark study in the topic. A less well-known source I found was *Clever Concealment* (1993) by Awad Mansour. From this I found useful maps and a concise summary of the Labor party's settlement policy. I was impressed by the ability of the ILL to track down a source like this that is largely lost to history.

But for the UW library, the honors thesis would have meant little to my education. The ability to checkout dozens of books for free was necessary for a student like myself, but I also had access to more important resources from which I learned valuable lessons going forward. My ideas for the thesis developed over time and slowly improved into what could become a final draft, but without the UW library I would have had only ideas and no means of research. The most important take away from this year of research was that sometimes sources are hiding in plain sight—they just have to be read critically and contextualized.