

Stolen Memories: Israeli State Repression and Appropriation of Palestinian Cultural Resources
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The 1948 events known to Palestinians as “the nakbah” (or catastrophe) set off perhaps the most intractable dispute of the twentieth (and now, the twenty-first) century. From 1948 to 1949, Zionist militias stormed throughout the land that would later become Israel (although to this the country has never defined its borders), ethnically cleansing 800,000 Palestinian Arabs from their homes and emptying 531 villages and 11 urban neighbourhoods (Pappe 2006: xiii). Like most refugees who find themselves in situations of military conflict, the Palestinian refugees fled because they were forced out or because they wished to escape the fighting. Most fled to neighbouring countries, although eventually many made their way to other countries. These Palestinians form the Palestinian diaspora which is now spread out all over the world. Although United Nations recognition of Israel as a country in 1948 was predicated on the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, Israel has never allowed the return of any Palestinian refugee. In contrast, any Jewish person from anywhere in the world retains the “right of return” to Israel. Meanwhile, the descendants of the approximately 170,000 Palestinians who were not forced out and are today Israeli citizens are subject to discrimination through a variety of laws favouring Jewish Israelis (Adalah 2014). Nonetheless, the right of Palestinian refugees to return is a right guaranteed by United Nations Resolution 194 which was adopted December 11, 1948.

The 1967 occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was another tragic event in the history of Palestinians which has come to be known as “al-naksah” (or the smaller catastrophe). Following Arab defeat in the 1967 war, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza and placed them under martial law in which every aspect of their life was controlled by Israeli Occupation Forces. United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 called for Israel’s immediate withdrawal from the Territories; however, since 1967, Israel has blithely continued to ignore the resolution and, in fact, has gone on to defy international law even further by establishing colonies, transferring population, and stealing more Palestinian land in the West Bank.

The 1993 Oslo Accords aimed to formally bring about a two-state solution to the conflict, but in essence these accords have only further entrenched Israel’s colonial occupation of the West Bank, stealing even more land and settling more colonists. While it claims to have withdrawn from the Gaza Strip, in reality Israel maintains an air and sea blockade of Gaza and continues to hold the area under siege. Two brutal military attacks on Gaza in 2008–09 and 2014 have left Gaza in desperate economic straits in what is essentially a humanitarian disaster zone. In any case, Israel’s non-concern for the negotiation of a two-state solution to the conflict was fully on display following the 2015 election when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that if he were elected, there would be no Palestinian state (Ravid 2015).

Palestinian history since 1948 has been marked by theft of land and resources; however, it has also been marked by a repression of Palestinian cultural memory. In a remark demonstrating her total disregard and contempt for Palestinian culture, former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir remarked, “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people.” Meir’s remark could hardly be dismissed as offhand for in fact it was an apt summary of the contempt Israel has demonstrated

for Palestinian cultural memory and history. Indeed, attempting to hide evidence of Palestinian existence was a prime reason for razing many of the approximately 400 depopulated or destroyed Palestinian villages and covering them with pines native to Europe and prickly pear cacti native to the Americas.

Article 247 of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) stipulates that works of art, books, and manuscripts should be returned to the states from which they were taken (Kost 2014), while the Hague Convention of 1907 forbids the confiscation or plundering of private property in occupied territory and also states that the absence of owners does not justify plunder or causing damage to property. The Hague Convention also decrees that all moveable property taken must be returned after the war (UNESCO 1954–1999). Disregarding these statutes, since its inception, Israel has deliberately destroyed and looted Palestinian libraries, archives and cultural institutions. Moreover, it has implemented policies of censorship and restriction of materials in both Israel and the Occupied Territories and it has also deliberately harassed, imprisoned, and assassinated Palestinian writers, journalists, and other cultural workers. These policies have been practiced against Palestinians within Israel proper, in the Occupied Territories, and also against Palestinians living in the diaspora.

As Israeli historian Ilan Pappé states in the 2011 documentary *The Great Book Robbery*, the appropriation of cultural resources is no different than the looting and theft of land and resources (Brunner 2011). As Pappé continues, the theft and appropriation of cultural resources was done to defeat the Palestinian narrative and to write them out of history. It has also served to erase Palestinian identity for what happened in 1948.

Given the evidence, one might think that various world library associations might have come to the Palestinians' aid; however, this has not been the case. Despite the efforts of brave persons within organizations such as ALA, Palestinians have seen resolutions censoring Israel rescinded or edited to exclude reference to Israel. Organizations such as the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), meanwhile, absurdly cling to a "both sides" argument in which both Palestinians and Israelis are equally held to blame for intransigence.

Library Resolutions and Delegations Concerning Israel

Over the years, Israel has been subject to two American Library Association resolutions condemning its practices against Palestinian libraries and archives.

In 1992, for example, a resolution passed at the ALA convention in San Francisco cited Israel's banning of publications and books, the imprisonment and deportation of journalists, and the closure of universities, libraries, and research centers. It also paid attention to the United States' close military and economic ties then as now, noting that Israel was the largest recipient of American aid, a policy which made the United States complicit in Israel's policy of censorship and human rights violations (Lorenz 1993). The resolution had been several years in the making and was a response to Israeli repression of the popular Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza from 1987 to 1993 which has come to be known as the First Intifada. The most contentious part of the resolution was the call to end censorship and human rights violations in the Occupied

Territories and Israel. The ALA had directed similar calls against countries such as the United Kingdom, China, the Soviet Union, and South Africa, and these resolutions had not been considered controversial. The resolution had been formulated by the ALA's Social Responsibility Round Table (SRRT) but it had also been discussed in open forums throughout the organization, including ALA Membership, ALA Council, the African / Asia Section, the Intellectual Freedom Round Table, the Ethnic Materials and Information Exchange Round Table, and the Jewish Librarians Committee (SRRT 1993: 6). A second resolution in support of Birzeit University librarian Omar Safi, who was being threatened with deportation from Israel, was also on the table (Kagan 2015: 248).

The 1992 resolution called upon the Government of Israel "to end all censorship and human rights violations in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza, and in Israel itself." The remainder of the resolution was a rather generic and rhetorical call to encourage both Israeli and Palestinian representatives "in the quest for a peaceful and just solution of their conflict" and encouraged ALA members to "develop ways to support librarians, journalists and educators, and others working for peace, human rights and freedom of information and expression in the Middle East." The final call asked the International Relations Committee (IRC) of the ALA to "develop strategies" towards these ends (Resolution on Israeli Censorship 1993).

The call was deemed controversial because of the now-familiar intervention of pro-Israeli groups such as Bnai Brith's Anti-Defamation League (ADL). According to the SRRT resolution, during the 1993 Midwinter Conference in Denver, the ALA Council had amended the original resolution and referred it to the International Relations for further study, even though the resolution had already been passed at the 1992 conference. As Steven J. Stillwell of the SRRT noted at the time:

It is difficult to see what might be accomplished by further study of an issue that had been studied exhaustively already. I hope that the IRC will begin to develop strategies 'to support those working for peace, human rights and freedom of information and expression in the Middle East' as directed by the original resolution, at the same time it proceeds with further study (Stillwell 1993: 2)

It should be noted that the ADL campaign against the resolution followed revelations that ADL had spied on and compiled files on people who had attended meetings the ADL considered anti-Israel. These revelations were revealed through a San Francisco police investigation (Chandler 1994).

In a now familiar refrain, the Anti-Defamation League accused those initiating, sponsoring, and supporting the resolution of fomenting anti-Semitism. Now as then, the ADL resorted to intimidation tactics. Stephen J. Stillwell documented Anti-Defamation bullying, writing that during a visit with members of ALA's Gay and Lesbian, Feminist, Environmental, and International Human Rights Task Force during the 1993 Midwinter Conference, he and fellow SRRT member Mark Rozenweig were approached by a man who identified himself as a member of the ADL and took hold of his convention badge so that he could copy down the name and affiliation correctly. As Stillwell remarked, he found this action "rather threatening" (Stillwell 1993: 2).

In turn, the ADL began urging members, particular Jewish Zionist librarians, to attend meetings to revoke the resolution, although pressure from outside the organization was also applied. Demonstrating contempt for notions such as freedom of expression, Zionist supporters employed tactics designed to shut down open debate. During the 1992 conference, for example, one SRRT session was almost cancelled because of prolonged Zionist heckling of Israeli journalist and peace activist Michal Schwartz who described her own experience with Israeli censorship and her arrest by Israeli authorities. At the same conference, fire alarms were mysteriously set off, presumably to stop panel members from presenting the issue to the ALA membership (Chandler 1994).

In the end, Zionist opponents quashed the resolution by supporting a smear campaign directed against David Williams, a Chicago librarian who was the catalyst in forcing the ALA to examine Palestinian intellectual freedom. In fact, Williams had been attacked earlier by the ADL and other Chicago groups because he had compiled a bibliography on the Palestinian-Israeli issue which displeased these groups. Williams had also been taken to task by activist librarian Sanford Berman from Minnesota because he contested a phrase in the preamble to the resolution which stated, "Whereas Israel considers itself a democracy established with the express purpose of creating a safe haven for the Jewish people." Williams contested the "the" in the phrase "the Jewish people" as it seemed to him to justify Zionism by describing all Jews in the world as one nation (Chandler 1994), a concept that justified the displacement of indigenous Palestinians from their land while allowing a person identifying as Jewish an automatic right of return and citizenship.

The ADL also threatened to mobilize a national campaign against the ALA as well targeting its funding, yet at the ALA's Midwinter Conference held in 1993 Anti-Defamation League Members mysteriously were given ALA membership badges instead of guest badges, even though the group had threatened to mobilize a national campaign against the ALA, including its funding, if it continued to support the resolution. Finally, at the 1993 conference held in New Orleans, which was also attended by Hadasah Jewish Women's Organization, the right-wing Zionist media monitor CAMERA and the Jewish Federation, the resolution was revoked. Soon after, the ALA centralized all positions taken by the ALA Council, and the Israeli Censorship and Palestinian Libraries Task Force Committee was disbanded after one interrogation of Williams and Stillwell. The Committee's disbandment was officially effected at the 1994 ALA Meeting in Miami. Williams was accused of making anti-Semitic comments and was banned from holding a position on the SRRT for three years, while Sanford Berman argued that the 1993 Oslo Accords negated the need for further discussion of the issue (Chandler 1994). Meanwhile, as the Oslo Accords have been proven a fraudulent process that has been followed by the continuous theft of more Palestinian land, the establishment of more Israeli colonies, the building of a massive "separation" wall (the Palestinians call it the "Apartheid Wall") deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2004, and the creation of a further apparatus of repression which sees the Palestinian Authority enforcing its role as Israel's colonial policemen, it is apparent that it is Williams, rather than Berman, who has been vindicated. In retrospect, it is Williams' argument that the ALA had allowed the ADL to set the parameters of debate and intellectual freedom in an organization predicated on intellectual freedom (Chandler 1994) was prescient.

In any case, contradicting Berman's assertion that the Oslo Accords disavowed the need for the 1993 resolution on censorship, the ALA was forced to discuss the issue further. On June 19, 2002, the ALA adopted a Resolution on the Destruction of Palestinian Libraries, Archives, and Other Cultural Institutions. The resolution followed closely upon the cultural destruction of Palestinian libraries, archives, and cultural centers wrought by Israel's "Operation Defensive Shield" in March and April of 2002 (see below). By the end of the operation, over thirty public, nongovernmental, and academic libraries, government archives, and private institutions had been affected. Moreover, the destruction proved to be purely deliberate and systematic (Twiss 2012) and based on revenge, as most of the heavy fighting had dissipated at the time of the destruction. In response, the ADL once again stepped into the breach and termed the resolution "one sided" and "troubling and wrong." Mark Regev, who is now the chief spokesman for the government of Israel, declared, despite massive evidence to the contrary, "We don't target libraries; we don't burn books" (JTA 2002). In contrast, Yasser Abed Rabbo, then Palestinian Minister of Culture and Information, concluded that the devastation was "cultural cleansing" which was designed to "make us a society without a history or memory" (Twiss 2011).

The Social Responsibilities Round Table resolution originally passed on to the ALA Council originally contained language that deplored the destruction of "Palestinian cultural resources" by "Israeli forces" and called upon the "Israeli government to refrain from further actions of this type" (JTA 2002); however, in the actual ALA Council resolution these words are deleted, leading one to wonder if the destruction perhaps occurred by osmosis. The actual resolution mentions that "in the course of recent events in the Middle East, Palestinian computers, photocopiers, books, audio recordings, video recordings, data, institutional archives and records and objects of historical, cultural, and artistic importance were destroyed" [the reader is left not knowing who destroyed these artefacts]. It then declares that "Palestinian libraries and cultural institutions are urgently in need of restoration and assistance," although the question of why these libraries and cultural institutions need restoration and assistance is not addressed. The resolution goes on to deplore "the destruction of libraries and cultural resources anywhere in the world; and, therefore, the destruction of these library cultural resources," but again it remains silent on who committed the actual destruction. The resolution further resolves to call "upon the government of the United States, as well as other governments, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental resources to prevent further destruction of libraries [again, one is left asking, by whom?] and to provide material assistance to Palestinian libraries and cultural institutions." The resolution ends by committing to ask IFLA to establish a study group on Palestinian libraries and cultural institutions and provide a mechanism for providing assistance to them (International Relations Office 2002).

The instrument for IFLA providing a mechanism for providing assistance to Palestinian libraries may have been answered by the IFLA preliminary report and recommendations from an IFLA/FAIFE-mission to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories which was conducted April 13–27 by Stuart Hamilton and Frode Bakke. In the end, the report remains wholly inadequate as a means to protect Palestinian cultural heritage. Extolling the "two sides" theory in which both sides are seemingly equal at fault, the delegation remains silent about Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank, its legal settlements, and its "separation wall." Indeed, Israel's ongoing violations of Palestinian human rights are absolved "because of [Israel's] ongoing

security worries in the wake of the second Intifada,” as if Israel does not have the eleventh-largest army in the world (Bender 2014) backed by the world’s largest superpower or is the recipient of billions of dollars in Western aid as well as the latest modern weapons. Meanwhile, nothing is said about the ongoing Palestinian security worries in the face of a brutal Israeli occupation. Palestinians, the report declares, must deal with “severe restrictions of movement within the Palestinian territories,” but the threat of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, the confiscation of their land, or the threat of extrajudicial assassination is not mentioned. Hamilton and Bakken remark in very grave tones that for “both sides” the conflict means that “any discussion of how to move forward is clouded by past events and present difficulties.” Then, remarkably, given that the delegation takes place only five years after the Israeli assault on Palestinian libraries and archives, an occurrence about which they remain entirely silent, the two proceed to lament that they could not visit Gaza because this meant that they could not investigate the “allegedly deliberate Palestinian attacks on Palestinian institutions there”! Still later, instead of decrying the ongoing Israeli censorship of library materials in the West Bank, the two criticize *one* incident of the censorship of a book of Palestinian folktales by Palestinian Authority (IFLA 2007).

Israeli Destruction, Looting, Theft, and Censorship of Palestinian Libraries, Archives, and Cultural Institutions

Despite the ALA rescindment of the resolution condemning Israeli censorship in 1994, despite the failure of the ALA to actually name Israel in the resolution on the destruction of Palestinian libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions, and despite IFLA’s insistence that Israel and Palestine are two equal partners who should conduct more negotiations to improve matters, there is in fact a long history of Israeli destruction and theft of Palestinian libraries, archives, and cultural institutions.

Indeed, such practices began with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Despite Golda Meir’s assertion that “there is no such thing as a Palestinian people,” the vibrant cultural life that existed in Palestine prior to 1948 is a damning riposte to the Zionist myth that Jewish immigrants were coming to a land without people for a people without land. Indeed, Palestine was a place with many published journals, newspapers, and manuscripts and its many libraries and archives contained priceless manuscripts and rare books. Literary clubs and societies existed in Jaffa, Haifa, Jerusalem, and other smaller cities, while the coastal city of Jaffa assumed the status as the most important cultural hub, even competing culturally with Beirut and Cairo with its theatres, cinemas, bookstores, and publishing companies.

During the 1948 nakbah, however, as Zionist militias ethnically cleansed the area and as the indigenous Palestinians fled the violence, their possessions, including their books, personal papers, and photographs were subject to looting, first by partisan Zionist fighters and then, a few hours later, by the “official” looters, as Ilan Pappé calls them, hired to “collect” what became known as “abandoned property.” Between April 1948 and February 1949, librarians from the Hebrew University, in a joint operation with the Israeli Army, amassed 30,000 books and manuscripts from abandoned houses in West Jerusalem alone. In total, 70,000 books were appropriated (Brunner 2011). Thousands of books and manuscripts which were the property of

churches and educational institutions were also confiscated (Amit 2011: 9). Six thousand books were eventually marked with designation AP (for “abandoned property”), while the remaining books are assumed to have been incorporated into the general collection of the National Library of Israel located at Hebrew University. Although the designation AP may seem to indicate that the books were intended to be returned to their original owners, so far no attempt has been made to do so. Since 1948, the Custodian of Absentee Property has been responsible for the property of Palestinians who were expelled or fled after 1948, and this custodianship includes their books.

In the process, not only books were stolen. In fact, many other cultural artefacts belonging to Palestinians, especially photographs, ended up housed in Israeli archives. Many such items, however, were also destroyed in the fighting and have simply disappeared. Since their “collection,” many of these artefacts have been hidden away in Israeli archives for years. For instance, as Israeli curator Rona Cela was preparing a book of Palestinian photographs, she uncovered photographs in the Israeli Military Archives that had been stolen from the studio of Palestinian photographer Khalil Khissas (Brunner 2011). This appropriation of Palestinian cultural property reverberates on a number of levels. For instance, there are no state-run autonomous cultural institutions such as an archive or university for Arab citizens. Therefore, these citizens have no control over their own cultural resources. Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, meanwhile, must ask for permits to research these archives, while Palestinians in neighbouring Arab-speaking countries are denied access completely. Even Palestinians visiting from Western countries may very well be denied access to Israel based on their Arabic surname. A large percentage of Palestinians, therefore, are denied access to their own cultural heritage, and those who do gain access may be asked to pay money to the Israeli state in order to see it.

Meanwhile, the importance of the archive in such a highly contested historical terrain cannot be overestimated. Indeed, it is the declassification of many archival documents that has allowed the “New Israeli Historians” such as Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, Benny Morris, Tom Segev, and Baruch Kimmerling to challenge early Zionist myths by demonstrating that Britain did not try to stop the establishment of a Jewish state; that Palestinians did not freely abandon their homes, but rather were forced out as the result of a systematic and well-planned campaign of expulsion; that the Zionist militias were not a David confronting a Goliath, but rather were vastly superior in both manpower and weaponry compared to their divided Arab neighbours; and, finally, that it was Israel which prevented peace through its intransigence. This de-classification of certain documents in the Israeli archives has not been without consequence. As relayed to me by Rona Sela, this redefinition of the Zionist narrative has resulted in documents being re-classified and restricted. Sometimes this restriction can even happen in the middle of research once the archivist understands the parameters of the research. Ironically, evidence that the Israeli National Library was not so eager to return the books labeled “abandoned property” can be found in an archival document in a memorandum from the National Library in 1949, which states:

Although the salvaging of the books was done for its own sake and its immediate aim was saving intellectual property from loss and destruction, we did not conceal from the authorities our hope that a way would be found to transfer some, perhaps the majority, of those books to the possession of the University—when the time comes (Amit 2011: 18).

Indeed, Eliyahu Strauss, the director of the National Library's Oriental Sciences, acknowledged that the stolen books would vastly increase the National Library's research capability, adding that "if a substantial number of books [which we did not have] are bestowed on the National Library, we will be able to extend our research opportunities considerably" (Amit 2011: 11).

Perhaps the most infamous theft of Palestinian cultural materials was the theft from the Palestinian Archaeological Museum Library in Jerusalem which housed rare books and memorandums including the Dead Sea Manuscripts. After East Jerusalem was occupied in 1967, the Israeli authorities declared that the museum was under their control, and they stole and transferred rare manuscripts, including the Dead Sea manuscripts (Balawi 2003: 15).

The disdain the Israeli Army demonstrated for Palestinian cultural memory in 1948–1949 replicated itself in 1982 when Israeli troops looted the research center of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Beirut established in 1965. According to Sabry Jiryès, the director of the Research Center, Israeli troops confiscated 25,000 volumes of books, a printing press, microfilms, manuscripts, and archives. In addition, they smashed filing cabinets, desks, and other furniture and stole telephones, heating equipment, and electric fans. The troops also used explosives to pry a safe open. Many of the papers lost were possibly irreplaceable (Hijazi 1982). In a telling comment after the looting of the research center, one Palestinian asserted that the attack was "intended to obliterate all memory of Palestine, the country we left behind." Indeed, before leaving, the Israeli troops symbolically removed the word "Palestine" from a sign hung outside the office (Hijazi 1982).

The archives of the Palestinian Liberation Organization was marked a second time in 2001 as the Israeli Army closed Orient House, the headquarters of the PLO after the Oslo Accords, which housed a library and archives. In the process, a significant portion of the archives, including photographs, official documents, and historical newspapers were confiscated. The library remains closed to this day with the Israelis employing an Ottoman law which is renewed every six months to keep it shut. Meanwhile, the condition of materials remaining inside deteriorates (Weiss 2014).

The same loutish behaviour displayed in the 1982 attack on the PLO Research Center manifested itself in the Israeli Army rampage of libraries, archives, and cultural materials in the West Bank in 2002. Among the many egregious acts were the destruction of administrative records and oral history archives of Palestinian cinema, the destruction of scientific equipment and microcomputers, and the pillaging of computers at the Ministry of Education. Palestinian Radio and TV buildings in Ramallah were also attacked. The Israeli government also conducted bombing raids on educational and cultural centres such as the National Musical Institute and the Cultural Centre of Sakakin (Gdoura 2003: 36). Clearly, since the worst fighting had already ended by the time of the raids, the destruction of property and resources had nothing to do with security but rather seemed a calculated attempt to intimidate Palestinians into submission.

Twelve years later, the ongoing Israeli attempt to erase Palestinian cultural memory came full circle when on August 2, 2014, the Israeli Army bombed the Islamic University in Gaza which houses the Palestinian Oral History Centre. The centre was launched as part of the university's faculty of arts, and works to conduct oral history interviews and maintain Palestinian identity,

heritage, customs, and traditions (Catron 2013). Although the collection was not harmed, Israel's targeting of an institution of higher learning (in itself a decidedly reprehensible deed) housing an institute dedicated to preserving Palestinian cultural memory is also a highly symbolic action.

After the 1967 occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, Palestinians were subject to the same restrictions which applied to the Arab citizens who remained in Israel proper. These measures included restricting access to books, newspapers, and journals by placing them under strict Israeli censorship laws. Before any book was published, it was passed on to the Israeli military censor who decided whether it could be published or not. As a result, the number of books published in the Occupied Territories remained low, and there were also long delays in publication and printing. In addition, there was strict press censorship and a ban on the importation of magazines and newspapers deemed subversive (Badiri: 31-32). After the 1967 occupation, universities and schools were raided by the Israeli Army, which proceeded to confiscate books and other materials deemed subversive. Books and journals that appeared on an official blacklist, which numbered in the thousands, were declared "illegal." Indeed, the possession of such banned books was used as an excuse in 1984–85 to close Al-Najah University in Nablus and Birzeit University near Ramallah for two months. Moreover, libraries were charged an import license for each and every title, plus a seventeen percent tax. Unsurprisingly, all of these measures had the effect of cutting off Palestinians in the West Bank from intellectual trends in the Arab world (Sayej-Naser 1999: 120–121). It is the censorship of this period that the 1992 American Library Association resolution sought to remedy.

Today in the West Bank, libraries suffer under similar conditions. The Israeli government maintains a list of banned words for books, resulting in, for example, works by Agatha Christie under suspicion for being subversive works. Books and journals coming from so-called "enemy" countries are sequestered at the border with Jordan, very often for a period of six months, before they are allowed entry. The libraries are then made to pay for the sequestering.

Deliberate Harassment, Imprisonment, and Assassination of Palestinian Writers, Journalists, and Other Cultural Workers

Since its inception as a state in 1948, Israel has shown little regard for Palestinian writers, journalists, and other cultural workers either inside Israel itself, the West Bank and Gaza, or the diaspora. Those Palestinians who remained within the boundaries of what is now Israel were subject to military law restricting their freedom of movement, making it impossible to travel from one village to another without the permission of the Israeli military governor. Arrests could be made without charge, and Palestinians could be made to submit to police supervision. Moreover, the Palestinians who remained were expected to transform to "Israeli Arabs," whose identity with neighbouring Arabs, from whom they were cut off, was to be subsumed to being Israeli, even if that identity meant being treated as second-class citizens.

In the years following the nakbah of 1948, all publications were placed under severe censorship, and the importation of Arabic-language books was banned. Leaderless in the early years of the establishment of Israel, the Arab minority turned to Palestinian poets for political inspiration. Humanist, cosmopolitan, and revolutionary, these poets became known as the "poets of the

resistance,” and they began holding poetry recitals in public squares. Eventually these poets drew the attention of the Israeli authorities from attending the festivals (Hoffman 2009: 258). One of these poets, Rashid Hussein (1936–1977), became a schoolteacher, as this profession was one of the few government positions open to Arab citizens. When Hussein was arrested at a political rally in 1958, he lost his teaching position. In 1960, he was arrested and imprisoned for possessing Egyptian and Lebanese newspapers and journals (Hoffman 2009: 290). By 1966, Hussein, who was once inspired by a dream of Arab and Jewish co-existence, left Israel for New York, where he died in an apartment fire. When he died, he had become totally disillusioned with the possibility of co-existence.

A similar trajectory of censorship, harassment, and imprisonment attended the life of Samih al-Qasim (1939–2014), a Palestinian Druze citizen of Israel who refused to be drawn into Israel’s colonial game of favouring the Druze as the prized Arab minority designated to act as the policemen over other Arabs. Al-Qasim refused to be drawn into this charade, and in fact wrote a letter to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in which he stated his refusal to join the Israeli Army and fight against his own people. Because he did so, he was arrested and forced to teach remedial Arabic and Hebrew without pay (Hoffman 2006: xvii). Just as the poet Rashid Hussein, al-Qasim attended the poetry festivals held in Arab villages. Like Hussein, the Israeli military authorities soon noticed his activities, and he was fired from his teaching post. His book of poetry on the Israeli Army massacre of 43 Israeli Palestinians at the village of Kafr Qasim in 1954 was censored, with the second half of the poem totally excised (Hoffman 2009: 262). Al-Qasim was imprisoned repeatedly, placed under house arrest, and forced to perform compulsory labour.

The life of poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) also followed a pattern similar to Hussein and al-Qasim, except that Darwish’s family fled to Lebanon in 1948. After a year, the family managed to return to their former home, but because the family was not included in the first census, they were labeled “infiltrators” who were declared illegal in their own homeland. In primary school, the Arab headmaster and his parents hid him whenever police or government officials appeared, and finally Darwish and his family only acquired identity cards because Darwish’s family claimed he had been living with a Bedouin family in the northern Galilee during the census (Shaheen 2009). In primary school, Darwish was called before the military governor for the crime of reciting a poem deemed unsuitable for a ceremony celebrating the establishment of Israel. The governor informed Darwish that if he kept reciting such poetry, his father could be fired from his job at a quarry. Like Al-Qasim, Darwish endured continual arrest and imprisonment, and throughout 1967 he lived under partial but permanent house arrest and was forced to be home each day by sunset. In 1970, exhausted by the constant harassment of Israeli informers, he announced from Cairo that he would not be returning to Israel. Essentially, Israel seemed to view its Arab writers as dangerous terrorist threats.

Palestinian writers in the diaspora, meanwhile, were targeted for assassination. The writer Ghassan Kanafani (1936–1982), who was a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), was killed in Beirut along with his nine-year-old niece Lamis, in a car bombing for which Israel later claimed responsibility (Kilpatrick 1976: 15). In fact, Kanafani’s killing in July 1972 was only the first that year; it was followed by the murders of poet Kamil Nasir in Lebanon, fiction writer Majed Abu Sharar and translator Wael Zuaiter in Rome, and

intellectual Mahmoud Hamshari in Paris. Israel used the familiar excuse of “security” needs to justify the murders; however, under international law such extrajudicial killings are illegal and are considered a violation of human rights. Meanwhile, Kanafani’s fiction as well as the poems of West Bank poet Fadwa Tuqan—who died on December 12, 2003 as her ancestral home was under Israeli siege—are forbidden to be taught in the curriculum for the Arab school sector because their literature is deemed too subversive. In fact, Israeli authorities have failed repeatedly to produce a list of poets and writers “acceptable” for study by Arab school children, and it was only in 2012 that the Israeli authorities considered including the works of al-Qasim and Darwish in the official literature textbooks for Arab schoolchildren (Marjiya 2012). No doubt, if the works of al-Qasim and Darwish are included, they will be scrutinized to avoid including the most “dangerous” poems.

The harassment of Palestinian writers, intellectuals, and other cultural figures is not a phenomenon of the past. One of the most high-profile cases in recent years is the targeting of Azmi Bishara, who was a member of the Israeli Knesset and leader of the Balad Party as well as a prominent intellectual. In 2007, Bishara became the object of a high-profile Israeli probe which planned to bring “security” charges against him. During the probe, Israeli censorship was such that newspapers were prohibited from reporting on the matter. Although Bishara and his party had been the object of Israeli police investigation for years because his party called for a democratic and secular state for all of Israel’s citizens, in 2007 he was interrogated by the Israeli police on suspicion of aiding and passing information to the enemy during wartime, the war being Israel’s attack on Lebanon in 2006. Bishara was also accused of contacts with a foreign agent and receiving large funds of money transferred from abroad. In September 2006, shortly after the conclusion of the Israeli attack which Bishara had opposed, Bishara visited and made a speech in Syria. The following year, Bishara visited Lebanon, and this was followed by two Israeli police interrogations which he feared would lead to formal charges of “collaborating with the enemy.” Soon after, Bishara fled Israel, saying that he would never receive a fair trial and therefore would be forced to choose between prison, exile, or martyrdom. As Palestinian-American commentator Ali Abu Nimah posits, “These indeed are the only choices Israel has ever placed before Palestinians who refuse to submit to the racist rule of Zionism” (Abu Nimah 2007).

The following year, in 2008, Gazan journalist Mohammed Omer, who had just returned from abroad after accepting the Martha Gelhorn prize for journalism, was strip-searched at gunpoint and assaulted as he attempted to return to Gaza from the Allenby Bridge border crossing between Israel and Jordan (Frykberg 2008). Further Israeli contempt for the lives of Palestinian journalists is evidenced by the seventeen journalists killed by Israeli airstrikes and shelling during Israel’s attack on Gaza in July 2014. Israel would later claim that the many of the journalists’ killings were justified because they were “ Hamas.” In fact, these killings were war crimes (Countercurrents 2014).

Israel’s fear of Palestinian cultural workers manifested itself again in April 2013, when the West Bank cartoonist Mohammed Sabaaneh was also arrested at the Allenby Bridge border crossing between Israel and Jordan and charged with having “contact with a hostile organization.” Sabaaneh was held in indefinite detention without being charged, but the Israeli state alleged that he had contacted a publisher in Amman, Jordan to publish a book of cartoons. The “hostile

organization” was in fact the publishing house which in the past had published a book about Palestinian prisoners. Sabaaneh was ultimately sentenced to five months’ imprisonment and fined 10.000 shekels for his contact with the publishing house (Countercurrents 2015).

Conclusions

Surveying the various measures Israel has taken to erase Palestinian cultural memory, it becomes clear that since the establishment of Israel in 1948, there exists an unbroken line linking the looting and theft of Palestinian books and archival materials which took place at that time, to theft of the Dead Sea scrolls from the Palestinian Archaeological Museum Library in 1982, to the theft of the collection from the PLO Research Center in 1982, to the blacklisting of books and journals from Palestinian libraries under Israeli occupation, to the closure of the PLO’s Orient House in East Jerusalem in 2001, to the rampage the Israeli Army conducted against various libraries, archives, and cultural centers in the West bank in 2002, to the bombing of the Islamic University in Gaza that housed the Palestinian Oral History Centre in 2014.

Likewise, there exists an unbroken line of Israeli harassment of Palestinian writers and cultural workers, stretching from the harassment and imprisonment of Palestinian poets Rashid Hussein, Samih al-Qasim, and Mahmoud Darwish within Israel itself, to the assassination of Palestinian writers and intellectuals such as Ghassan Kanafani and Wael Zuaier in 1972, to the harassment of Palestinian intellectual and politician Azmi Bashara in 2007, to the physical assault on Gazan journalist Mohammed Omer in 2008, to the harassment and imprisonment of Palestinian cartoonist Mohammed Sabaaneh in 2013.

Then, too, there is a remarkable similarity in the tactics employed by pro-Israeli groups such as the Anti-Defamation League. In 1993, for example, as the ADL worked to rescind the ALA motion condemning Israeli censorship, the organization threatened to organize a national campaign against the organization, including targeting its sources of funding. Similarly, in 2014, Abraham Foxman from the ADL would threaten “donors give money and expect certain things” as his organization worked to ensure the rescindment of Palestinian American Steven Salaita’s appointment as professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (Guttman 2014). In the process, the bullying worked to rescind the ALA resolution of Israeli censorship in 1993. Meanwhile, the 2002 resolution condemning the destruction of Palestinian libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions, which finally removed the word “Israel,” clearly allowed pro-Israeli rhetoric to set the parameters of the debate, while the same process no doubt was at work as the IFLA delegation penned its “both sides” delegation report. This, despite the fact that it is certainly not Palestinians who have harassed, assassinated, and imprisoned Israeli writers, intellectuals, and other cultural workers or worked to destroy, steal, and censor Israeli cultural artefacts.

In the end, it is perhaps fitting to leave the last word to Palestinian poet (and former mayor of Nazareth) Tawfiq Zayyad (1939–1994) to talk back to Israeli and Western colonial hypocrisy. In his poem “My Country is a Graveyard,” translated by Asad Abu Khalil, Zayyad wrote, “Gentlemen, you have transformed / my country into a graveyard. / You have planted bullets in

our heads / and organized massacres. / Gentlemen, nothing passes like that without account. / Everything you have done to our people / is registered in notebooks.”

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