Stolen Pieces of Palestine: Archival Responsibility in the Case of Displaced Archives

Connor White

Abstract

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to the displacement of thousands of Palestinians from their homes, leaving behind furniture, books, documents, and other items relating to their cultural heritage. These items were captured by the invading Israeli forces and sealed away in their archives and libraries, where they remain to this day. Since this first phase of pillaging in 1948, Israel has continued to sequester away pieces of Palestinian cultural heritage which they collected during the Six-Day War and its repeated invasions into the Gaza Strip. This article examines the ways in which these items, particularly records and books, were seized by Israel and integrated into its archival infrastructure. Through acquisition, arrangement, description, and access, Israel and its archivists hold the power to create, transform, or destroy what remains of Palestine's documentary heritage.

Keywords

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, displaced archives, Palestinian cultural heritage, appraisal and description

On April 29, 1948, Haganah forces invaded and occupied the densely populated Arab neighbourhood of Katamon in West Jerusalem. Following the invasion, the hundreds of Arabs who inhabited Katamon fled to free areas or left the country altogether, taking with them only what they could carry. In their wake, they left behind most of their belongings, including furniture, clothing, and books (Amit, 2011a, p. 10). Among these Palestinians was Khalil al-Sakakini, a well-known Arab-Christian writer and educator. In his flight from his home, only one day following the invasion, he was forced to leave behind his beloved library. Following his flight, al-Sakakini settled in Cairo where he wrote a fond farewell to his books:

> Farewell, my library! Farewell, the house of wisdom, the abode of philosophers, a house and witness for literature! How many sleepless nights I spent there, reading and writing, the night is silent and the people asleep… goodbye, my books!... I know not what has become of you after we left. (1990, pp. 239–240)

Sakakini, despite this impassioned farewell, would never discover the fate of his beloved books, passing away in forced exile in Egypt in 1953. It was only in 1967 that his daughters, Hala and Dumya, found their father's books, still containing his handwritten notes in the margins, during a visit to the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem (the National Library; Amit, 2011b, p. 15).

Many Palestinian families who were forced to abandon their homes and flee following the Israeli invasion of Palestine in 1948 have similar stories; although, unlike Sakakini, far more often, books and records left behind were never rediscovered by their owners or their family. The Arab-Israeli War (1948-1949) saw the permanent displacement and dispossession of approximately 750,000 Palestinians, nearly two-thirds of all Arabs living in the former British Mandate of Palestine. This period, known by Palestinians as the *Nakba* (the Catastrophe), was only the beginning of Israel's campaign to drive Palestinians out of the newly founded state of Israel and its surroundings and to eliminate Palestinian culture and way of life. After all, according to the then-newly appointed Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in a 1969 interview with *The Sunday Times*, "There was no such thing as Palestinians . . . They do not exist" (Giles, 1969, p. 12).

One of the tools employed by the Israeli state to erase Palestine and its culture was, and remains, the power of the archive. As with books, Israel has

amassed thousands of records seized from Palestinian homes and organizations throughout their colonial campaign against Palestine. This includes the period during the Nakba, but also during the invasion of Palestinian lands in the rest of modern-day Israel, in Gaza, and in Lebanon during the Israeli-Lebanese Conflict (1968-2006). Archival records represent important evidence of a nation's cultural history and identity. As such, in times of war and settlement, belligerent nations seek to capture their opponent's archives to shift the balance of power in their favour. By capturing records, and often displacing records by integrating them into their own archives, nations seize the power to destroy, rewrite, modify, and hide another nation's history. This paper explores this phenomenon, not only as a political tool but as an example of archival responsibility and accountability, by investigating the seizure of Palestinian archival records by Israeli forces during and following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and placing it in a broader context of European colonialism and archival decolonization.

Before delving into the main topic of this paper, some information about the terminology used and the scope of the paper is necessary. The term "Palestine" will be used to refer to the areas covered by the British Mandate in Palestine as it was established in 1922. The term "Israel" will be used to identify the borders of the state of Israel as outlined in the 1949 armistice. This term, therefore, does not include Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, or any other land captured by or claimed by Israel since 1949. This paper will also make use of the terms "colonial archive" and "displaced archive." The former will cover "official documents produced in a colonial territory" by a colonial authority as well as materials and records seized from native populations which were integrated within the archives of the colonist nation (Hiribarren, 2017, p. 74). The term "displaced archives," as defined by James Lowry (2019), relates to all archival materials (1) which are removed from their context of creation and (2) whose ownership is disputed (p. 349). In this context, the term "colonizer" will be applied to Israel and Zionists, while the term "colonized" will be applied to Palestine, the Palestinian people, and the Palestinian diaspora.

Displaced Archives in an International Context

Displaced archives are not a new phenomenon, but academic interest in this type of archive was heightened in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of two important historical events: decolonization and the Second World War. The mass decolonization of Europe's empires, which took place

after the Second World War, led to the creation of new, sovereign states in Africa, North and Latin America, and Asia. These states had, some for longer than others, been ruled by European nations such as Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal. Imperial rule led to the creation of millions of records which composed the colonial archive in colonized nations. During and following the fall of their empires, these European nations were faced with the challenge of deciding what to leave in place, what to transport back to the metropole, and what to destroy (Linebaugh & Lowry, 2021, p. 289). The archival material which they decided to take with them, thus displacing them from their context of origin, represents one form of displaced archive.

There are many famous examples of captured colonial archives throughout the decolonized world, but for the sake of example, the United Kingdom's so-called Migrated Archives will be examined. The Migrated Archives are a collection of records which were brought together by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 37 former British colonies (Linebaugh & Lowry, 2021, p. 286). As part of "Operation Legacy," a larger phenomenon across Britain's African colonies, British administration in the colonies began to sort through colonial records in the face of their likely expulsion. British officials were instructed to remove or destroy any records which could cause "embarrassment" for the U.K. or which could incriminate officials and collaborators in any wrongdoings. In total, an inestimable number of colonial records were destroyed and approximately 20,000 documents from 37 ex-colonies were transported to Britain (Linebaugh & Lowry, 2021, p. 293). In archival terms, the British colonial administration was appraising its colonial records, deciding what needed to be removed, destroyed, or kept in their colonial setting to ensure administrative continuity while protecting British interests.

Another form of displaced archive which gained increased academic interest in the second half of the twentieth century were records seized in times of war, particularly those captured during the Second World War. The Nazi advance and capture of most of Europe was accompanied by mass looting by German forces. Many items of value were seized as trophies of war, including archival records. Many of the records and trophies taken by Nazi Germany would then be captured once again by advancing Soviet troops. Several of the records captured by the Soviets remain in the Russian State Military Archive—Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (RGVA)—though many have been returned to their country of origin (Grimsted, 2017, pp. 130–131). This example is only one of innumerable instances during which archival records were captured in times of war despite this plundering being illegal in international

courts of law. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles forbid the seizure of foreign archives by belligerent nations in times of war and instructs that all captured archives must be returned to their country of origin, a policy reiterated in the 1954 Hague Convention following the continued plundering during the Second World War (Kuntz, 2021, p. 18). However, despite these regulations, war, along with colonialism, remains one of the main reasons for the displacement of archives.

Captured Palestinian Archives

The Palestinian records seized by Israel fit into both categories of displaced archives; they were seized in times of war, and this seizure supported a colonial agenda. Since the invasion of Palestine in 1948, Israel has undertaken a campaign of displacement which has resulted in thousands of Palestinian records being sequestered away into Israeli archives and institutions. The first phase of this displacement took place during the Arab-Israeli War.

Between 1948 and 1949, Zionist militias swept through Palestinian lands granted by United Nations Resolution 181 on the separation of the former Palestinian mandate. During this invasion, approximately 800,000 Palestinian Arabs were forced to flee from their homes, leaving 531 villages and 11 neighbourhoods virtually deserted (Kuntz, 2021, p. 17). Immediately following these militants and soldiers, the "official" looters arrived: librarians and archivists who proceeded from house to house to collect and safeguard "abandoned" Palestinian belongings, including records, photographs, and books (Pappe, 2007, pp. 239–240). Many of these records would be transported over several months to the National Library and its archive or to the Israeli Military Archive, where archivists and librarians were tasked with appraising, classifying, and describing the thousands of records and approximately 30,000 books seized and stuffed into flour sacks and crates during this two-year period (Kuntz, 2021, p. 27).

More records were added to this number following the Israeli invasion of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967. Following the 1949 armistice, many Palestinians settled in these two regions which had not been captured by Israel during the Arab-Israeli War. These regions held what few records and belongings Palestinian refugees had been able to carry with them following the initial invasion of Palestine as well as the records which Palestinians had created since their displacement. These small strongholds of Arab resistance were seized in June 1967 during the 1967 War, also known as the Six-Day War by Israel and al-Naksa (the setback) by Palestinians. During this war, Israel seized

the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and placed them under military occupation, once again sifting through Palestinian records and sending them back to Israeli institutions. Despite United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, issued that same year, which called for the immediate withdrawal of Israel from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Israeli military presence in the West Bank continued until 1982. Their hold on the Gaza Strip was officially relinquished in 2005 but they still hold a blockade of Gaza by sea and periodically launch military attacks in the regions, the most notable being those of 2008-2009 and 2014[1] (Kuntz, 2021, p. 17).

The mass capture of Palestinian records by Israel in 1967 was done on sovereign, Lebanese soil. Lebanon was one of the Arab countries which welcomed thousands of Palestinian refugees following the Arab-Israeli War and the 1967 War. Since 1948, Palestinian refugees had established a flowering record-base in Lebanon which documented their activism and resistance against their Israeli colonizers (Sela, 2018, p. 202). Two such record repositories, the Palestine Research Center (PRC) and the Palestinian Film Archive (PFA) were located in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. In the context of the Israeli-Lebanese War (1968-2006), Israel invaded Beirut in June 1982 and captured records from both of these Palestinian institutions. The records seized in these archives contained books, articles, documents, microfilm, manuscripts, maps, photographs, newspapers, and various cinematic and photographic clips. The records of the PFA remain in the custody of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Ministry of Defense Archive and, while the records of the PRC were originally copied and returned to Palestine, they were once again captured in the newly re-established research center in East Jerusalem, Orient House, in 2001 (Sela, 2018, pp. 204–205).

Displaced Archives and Israel

All of the records seized from Palestinian private dwellings and organizations during Israel's colonial onslaught remain in Israeli custody today. Much like the Migrated Archive or the twice-stolen Nazi-Soviet records, these records are tools of power. These tools are employed by Israel to "defeat the Palestinian narrative and to write Palestinians out of history" (Kuntz, 2021, p. 19). Israel

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1   This paper was written in April of 2023, prior to the resurgence of violence in Gaza in October of that same year. Considering the ongoing nature of this conflict, the recent attacks on Palestinian cultural heritage are not included in this paper. These would benefit from their own article once a suitable peace has been reached and research can continue in this area of the world.

has employed the archive's ability to appraise, destroy, rewrite, and conceal, to promote the Israeli myth of the conquest of Palestine while making it nearly impossible for native Palestinians to refute their claims with archival evidence. This goal is accomplished through three aspects of Israel's appraisal plan for Palestinian records: their accession into Israeli archives and institutions, the restriction applied to their access, and their description.

During the first wave of displacement, archivists and librarians were instructed by Israel to collect important records for their "guardianship" to ensure that they were not destroyed in the war but rather "properly preserved" and eventually returned to their "rightful owners" (Amit, 2011a, p. 10). The language used in these instructions was quoted directly from a memo written by Kurt Warman, the director of the National Library, to the Israeli government in the first few weeks of the Israeli invasion. These terms appear in many similar documents written by institutions that were responsible for the processing of Palestinian records. This initial language does seem to indicate that for many archivists and librarians, their custody of these archives was merely a temporary, humanitarian effort of preservation rather than theft. Particularly, the notion of ownership implies that they were fully aware that Israel had no legal claim to these documents. Rather, they acknowledged that they were simply custodians of these records while they awaited the return of their legal owners. This memo appears to acknowledge Palestinian creatorship and provenance and Israeli custodianship (Amit, 2011a, p. 11).

This early language rapidly began to change as the invasion progressed. In a memo by Dr. Strauss, the head of the Eastern Sciences Department of the National Library, written a few months later, terms surrounding possession and ownership began to shift. He starts his letter with the phrase "The National Library was granted the right to collect abandoned libraries in the occupied territories" (Amit, 2011a, p. 14). Already, terms such as "right" and "abandoned" begin to appear. This memo implies that rather than being custodians, Israel had the ability to grant the National Library "the right" to collect Palestinian records, thus suggesting that Israel had legal ownership of these documents and could grant them to whichever institution it so pleased. The records are also identified as being "abandoned" and thus having no owners (Amit, 2011a, p. 14). This term relegates these records to lost objects, as though they were carelessly left by their owners on the side of the road for another to collect and preserve. It is clear by this use of possessive terminology that Israel had begun, mere months after their initial invasion of Palestine, to view the records they collected from Palestinian homes and organizations as their own property.

In the years that would follow, Israeli archivists and librarians began the work required to integrate the Palestinian records into the Israeli colonial mythos. As with the British Migrated Archives, and many other colonial archives, several Palestinian record groups remained closed and hidden from public view for decades. In the Israeli Military Archive, materials which document Israel's colonial advancement into Palestine and the records they seized during this period are locked away behind the walls of their colonial administration. A large part of the colonial apparatus is myth-making. The colonial mythos created by the colonizer dictate the history of the colonial period, the image of the colonizer, and the image of the colonized. In order to paint themselves in a better light, and to avoid "embarrassment," colonial powers would hide away any material which contradicts this mythos, whether it be created by their own government or by the colonized people (Sela, 2018, p. 206). There exist many colonial myths surrounding Israel, some of which have been proven wrong with the help of what few archival records researchers have been able to find. These include the myth that Palestine was a land without a people before Jewish immigration, similar to the myth of the empty New World, the notion that Great Britain did nothing to stall the establishment of a Jewish state in the Palestinian mandate following the First World War. Other myths proven incorrect was/are the idea that Palestinians freely abandoned their homes rather than being forced out of them by a systematic campaign of expulsion; and, finally, the myth that it is Palestine which prevented peace (Kuntz, 2021, pp. 27–29).

These myths and others have been protected by the restrictive limitations which govern who can view Israel's colonial archive. According to Israel's Archives' Regulation Law published in 2010, archival materials can be sealed for a period of 30 to 70 years, most often 50 years (Sela, 2017). However, materials can remain sealed indefinitely if they are judged by archivists as having the possibility to "seriously harm state's security, foreign relations or the right to privacy" (Sela, 2017, p. 87). While this indefinite sealing is not an uncommon practice for the maintenance of national security, it is a staple of colonial archives. This policy also makes it incredibly difficult to identify the exact number of records seized by Israel or their contents and location. Israel also goes further by adopting "discriminatory policies" to limit who has access to materials (Sela, 2018, p. 207). These policies include selective opening and closing of materials, particularly if their potential use by historians could help disprove Israel's colonial mythos. The Israeli archives also allow better access and freedom to researchers who support this mythos while barring access to those who do not. Under these policies, researchers have been discriminated

against and refused access to sensitive materials if they are of Palestinian descent, have an Arab name, or support Palestine (Sela, 2017, pp. 85, 87).

Israel also employs archival description (or lack thereof) to further hide materials and obfuscate historical research. For example, many of the books captured by Israel have been stripped of their provenance. According to their original classification in the 1950s and 1960s, books were inscribed with their owners' names through a system of abbreviations. However, following the 1967 War, these books were stripped of their provenance and the abbreviations were replaced with the acronym "AP" for "abandoned property." This policy destroyed the context of these records and split them from their provenance, making it almost impossible to return the books to their rightful owners by separating them from the lives and histories of those who owned them (Amit, 2011b, pp. 13–14).

During this latter period, archivists also began to replace the original Arab terminology used to describe records with foreign, Zionist terminology. These records were integrated into the IDF Archive's coding system, further alienating them from their context of origin. They were categorized and arranged according to Israeli norms, rather than Arab norms (Sela, 2018, p. 211). One of the best examples of this phenomenon is the fate of the records from the PFA. These records are catalogued by the IDF as records from the "PLO Archive." This terminology implies the existence of an organization called the Palestinian Liberation Organization Archive, whereas no such place existed (Sela, 2018, p. 205). Furthermore, the original Arab descriptions are replaced with Israeli descriptions which portray Palestinians as "infiltrators" and "terrorists" rather than refugees and freedom fighters (Sela, 2018, p. 212). These revisionist description strategies further separate the content of these archives from their creators and context, fully integrating them into the Israeli myth-making colonial apparatus.

In brief, Israel's capture of Palestinian archives and records since 1948 fits in a broader context of the European displacement of colonial archives as a means of creating and controlling colonial historical narratives. This phenomenon relies on the power of the archives and the way the archive collects, appraises, and describes materials so as to either keep them hidden from public view, destroy them so they can no longer threaten the colonizing nation, or redescribe them to fit a colonial mythos. The seizure of Palestinian archives and the ways in which they were integrated within the larger Israeli archival framework serves to bolster the Israeli mythos and support their colonial enterprise. For Palestine, these records are what remains of their documentary

historical presence prior to 1948. They are ownership deeds to properties they cannot return to, pictures of lost family members, or books containing the lost annotations of a father. The existence of these records presents both the hope of reunification and the sorrow of separation.

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About the Author

Connor White, Master of Information Candidate

University of Toronto

Connor (they/he) completed a Master of Arts in History at the University of Toronto in 2021. He is currently undertaking a Master of Information in Archives and Records Management from the same institution. Their research interests include disenfranchised groups and minorities such as BIPOC, refugees, and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Connor seeks to work with these communities to create reparative policies in archival institutions throughout Canada.

Email: connor.white@mail.utoronto.ca