

## **Destruction and Appropriation of Palestinian History and Cultural Property: The Responsibilities of Historians**

Israel as a state and society is premised on the destruction of the history and living society of the Palestinian Arab people and the effacement of the multiple histories of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea for most of the last 1,400 years - since the Muslim conquest of the Byzantine province of Palæstina in 640. This is not because all Zionist ideologues and politico-military leaders intended to destroy Palestinian society. Many did not; only a small minority understood that this would be the likely outcome of mass Jewish settlement in Palestine.

Thoughtful historians may reasonably debate: who intended what, how this process occurred, whether or not ethnic cleansing is the best term to describe it, whether or not Zionist leaders had a preconceived plan for expelling Palestinian Arabs during the 1948 war, how many were directly expelled, how many fled out of fear, and similar questions. Amateur historians like Joan Peters (*From Time Immemorial*), Alan Dershowitz (*The Case for Israel*), and most recently, the deputy managing editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, Caroline Glick (*The Israeli Solution: A One-State Plan*) have worked overtime (sometimes using nearly the same words) attempting to obfuscate the matter. But while their books have received outsized attention in the U. S. mass media, their arguments have been thoroughly refuted, often by Israeli scholars (for example, Yehoshua Porath's scathing critique of Peters in the *New York Review of Books*, January 16, 1986). There is no legitimate debate about whether or not some 700,000 indigenous inhabitants were expelled or fled from the territories that became the State of Israel after the 1948 War and that Palestinian Arab society was devastated in the process.

Important currents in Israeli politics and culture have never denied this. An outstanding example is S. Yizhar, whose iconic novella, *Khirbet*

*Khizeh* describes one of several expulsions he personally witnessed during the last phases of the 1948 war, when he was serving as the education officer of a Palmach (elite forces) unit. These expulsions are perhaps more egregious than others, because they occurred at a stage in the fighting when Israel's victory was certain. Although Yizhar is indisputably the leading Hebrew novelist of the 1948 generation (perhaps even of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), he was nearly unknown among English speakers until a tiny Israeli press translated *Khirbet Khizeh* in 2008. Farrar, Straus & Giroux republished it in December 2014.

In 1969 the much better known Moshe Dayan told students at the Technion (Israel's MIT):

Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I don't blame you because these geography books no longer exist. Not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages are not there either. Nahlal arose in the place of Mahlul; Kibbutz Gvat in the place of Jibta; Kibbutz Sarid in the place of Huneifis; and Kfar Yehoshu'a in the place of Tal al-Shuman. There is not one single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population.

Dayan's speech was reported in Israel's most prestigious daily *Ha'aretz* (April 4, 1969). The *New York Times* did not consider it news "fit to print."

Shira Robinson's award-winning book, *Citizen Strangers* recounts the fate of those Palestinian Arabs who remained on their lands and became citizens of Israel. They were subjected to military rule until 1966 and although they received citizenship and the right to vote, they were effectively excluded from the polity because nationality rather than citizenship is the key category in Israeli public life. The popular Israeli terms "Israeli Arabs," and in official parlance often simply, "minorities," efface their national identity, which is rendered simply as "Arab" on their

national identity cards. Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel still suffer from dozens of discriminatory laws and structural inequalities.

The destruction of Palestinian Arab society includes many instances of destruction of cultural property and patrimony. Historians have long been concerned about such matters, and properly so. For example, *AHA Perspectives* published an important essay on the destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage in the wake of the 2003 American invasion (<http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2003/iraqs-lost-cultural-heritage>). The Palestinian cultural patrimony has been subjected to similar perils.

Dr. Gish Amit, a lecturer at Ben Gurion University, discovered in the course of the research for his Ph.D. thesis that during the 1948 War Israeli military forces looted approximately 30,000 books and documents from Jerusalem, mostly the western parts of the city where the wealthier and better educated Arab population lived. Another 40-50,000 books were collected in the post-war years, mainly from Jaffa and Haifa, which had large Arab populations before 1948, but only several thousand after the war. About 26,000 of the looted books were shredded because Israeli officials objected to their contents; about 6,000 were "loaned" to the Near Eastern Studies Department of the National Library in Jerusalem, where they remain; others were sold to Arab schools.

Settlers masquerading as archaeologists (in the Elad organization, an acronym for "To the City of David) have seized important sections of the Israeli-annexed Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem. With funding from American Jewish physician and bingo magnate Irving Moskowitz, they have been conducting excavations literally under Palestinian homes endeavoring to prove that Silwan is the site of the biblical City of David. No archaeological or other historical evidence has been found that would confirm the existence of King David's palace or of Solomon's temple on a scale described in the Bible. But the

unprofessional and ideologically motivated settler-excavators have destroyed evidence of the presence of many other peoples and cultures in Silwan – 21 strata from the Canaanites, who established the first permanent settlement in Silwan some 5,000 years ago to the Muslims who ruled it from the mid-7<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 2008 settler-excavators uncovered human bones from the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries – the Muslim ‘Abbasid era. They were disposed of without notifying Israel’s Ministry of Religious Affairs and halting the excavations, as the regulations of Israel’s Antiquities Authority require.

The Israeli army occupied Beirut during its 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Before its evacuation it looted the Palestine Liberation Organization’s Research Center, seizing the entire library of 25,000 books, microfilms, manuscripts, and archives. Israeli soldiers also broke into the offices of the Institute for Palestine Studies, a private research center, and removed items and destroyed property.

In 2001 the Israeli army closed the unofficial PLO office in Jerusalem, known as Orient House, and stole the entire archive. The papers were handed over to the Research Department of Israel’s Foreign Ministry. After intelligence officers studied them, those deemed to have no political or security implications were deposited in the Israel State Archive, where they are labeled “abandoned documents.” We do not know what proportion, if any, of the original archive remains intact but inaccessible or if any of it was lost or destroyed.

In 2004, the Simon Wiesenthal Center announced plans to build a Center for Human Dignity over part of the Muslim Mamilla cemetery in West Jerusalem, used as a burial site since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The center ignored a 2006 court order by Israel’s *shari’a* court (which, like rabbinical courts, is an official part of Israel’s judicial system) to stop construction due to the discovery of skeletons. Final permission for construction was granted in 2011. According to Prof. Rashid Khalidi of Columbia University, a “parking lot was built over [part of the] cemetery

[in 1964]....so, the Israeli authorities are basically pushing ahead with the desecration of a cemetery that they have been, unfortunately, slowly nibbling away at for over three decades....What they have now done is to dig down and disinter four layers, according to the chief archaeologist for the Israeli Archaeological Authority” (*Democracy Now*, February 10, 2010). The cemetery is located across the street from the U.S. Consulate in West Jerusalem.

In the same way that linguists and anthropologists are committed to preserving endangered languages and cultures, historians are committed to retrieving endangered histories. In doing so we should be careful not to claim the capacity to speak for the subjects of those histories. Our obligations in this respect are to engage in historical reconstruction and debate so that suppressed or marginalized, even if for some uncomfortable, narratives and experiences are preserved as part of the historical record. They also entail defending the freedom of speech and academic freedom of scholars and students who study, teach, and speak publicly about subaltern narratives, no matter how unpopular their views may be, and even if some deem them “offensive.” Prof. Steven Salaita was recently “unhired” by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign for his allegedly “uncivil” tweets about Israel/Palestine during Israel’s assault on the Gaza Strip last summer. Emails among those responsible for the decision suggest that the actual problem was that the tweets were politically offensive and might negatively affect fundraising.

This is hardly a unique case. Norman Finkelstein’s *Beyond Chutzpah* thoroughly debunked Alan Dershowitz’s *The Case for Israel* – a quite possibly plagiarized and scholarly incompetent book. In 2007, under pressure from Dershowitz, De Paul University denied Finkelstein tenure in highly irregular circumstances. Unlike in the case of Prof. Salaita, AAUP’s Committee A did not initiate an investigation of DePaul. So there has been some progress on this front.

Much current discussion of Israel/Palestine in academia is focused on the Palestinian call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions. I do not think historians have any particular professional competence on whether or not this is an appropriate measure. We do have an obligation, like all scholars, to point out that advocating an academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions has nothing to do with anti-Semitism and does not violate the academic freedom of any individual scholars, who remain free to meet, collaborate, and discuss anything they wish.

Some oppose an academic boycott because they believe (or hope) that scholarly or other forms of “dialogue” contribute to peace. An absolute faith in the efficacy of dialogue often relies on historical amnesia and category errors. Dialogue between slaves and slave-holders or between abolitionists and slaveholders did not (and could not) bring about emancipation. Dialogue between French colonial settlers and Algerian Muslims did not lead to independence. Dialogue can be meaningful only when conducted among parties of equal status. In the case of Israel/Palestine, dialogue has most often served to perpetuate the status quo. Israeli scholars and institutions are generally pleased to regard Western scholars as their colleagues. Relatively few are willing to consider Palestinian scholars their peers, an expression of the underlying inequality that lies at the heart of any relationship between occupiers and occupied.

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