

NAKBA

The Untold Story of a Cultural Catastrophe



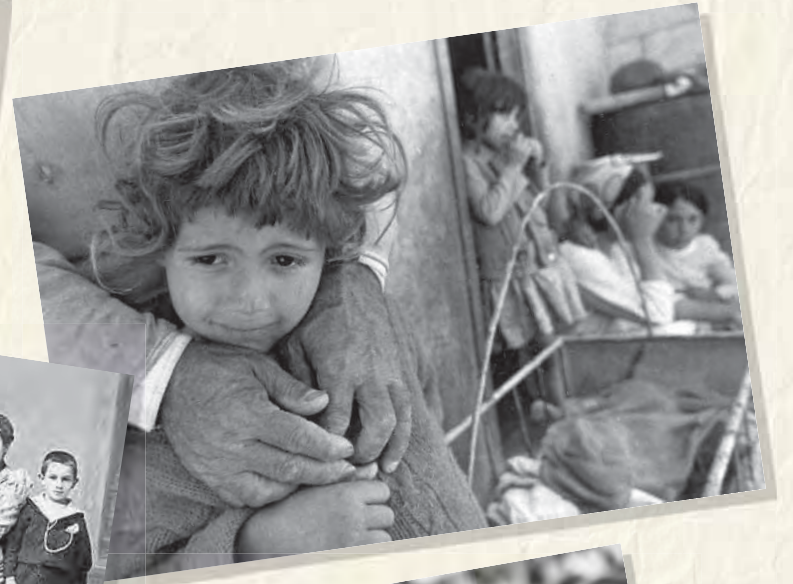
Palestine Liberation Organization

NEGOTIATIONS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

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NAKBA

The Untold Story of a Cultural Catastrophe



PROLOGUE

Nakba, meaning catastrophe, is commemorated by Palestinians throughout the world on May 15 every year. It marks the loss, dispossession and historic injustice suffered by the Palestinian people, through the forced expulsion from their homeland by Israeli forces and Zionist militia. Nakba commemorates the period when approximately 800,000 Palestinians, at the time 67% of the population, became homeless and/or, stateless refugees. Today, it is estimated that 7 of the 11 million Palestinians around the world are refugees, still roughly two-thirds of the Palestinian people.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) maintains that without a just and comprehensive resolution to the plight of Palestinian refugees, which includes the recognition of their loss, pain, and suffering, a comprehensive and viable peace in the region will remain elusive.

In addition to the loss of material property, including homes, land, orchards, groves, gold, money and other valuables, Nakba marks a cultural catastrophe for the Palestinian people, a loss they are still struggling to recover from.

Nakba, for Palestine, is about the loss of potential on a mass scale. It is about reducing a vibrant and highly accomplished culture into one filled with bitter-sweet memories consumed by the national cause of return and justice. Entire villages were destroyed, then rebuilt and renamed; books, music collections and works of art were left behind as people ran for their lives, expecting to return a few weeks later; sports clubs and social organizations disappeared with the communities of which they were a part. It was a systematic campaign of death, destruction, and cultural obliteration, carried out against a nation whose vibrant culture was forcibly stunted.

This document is a snapshot of Palestine before the Nakba. It is by no means comprehensive. Its aim is to provide a window into the Palestinian cultural achievements before 1948 and the devastating effects of this cultural Nakba on the Palestinians, a people whose sheer resilience has preserved a threatened heritage and collective memory. With perseverance and creativity, Palestinians have rebuilt, time and again, their institutions and reconstructed their cultural life, overcoming repeated setbacks and assaults. In short, Nakba is an on-going story of survival.

Social Life



Women dancing in Beit Jala, 1940s

"The guest-house or coffee house (diwan) was the popular informal gathering place in the village. It was the locus for "the discussion of public events, and for story-telling . . . playing games, and, especially during ramadan and at other festivals, is often enlivened with music. The coffee house is the substitute for the public-house, theatres, concert-halls, and all else" (Goodrich-Freer 1924:153). Visitors could stay in the villages guest-house and entertain them- selves freely."¹

One of the most famous photographers before Nakba was Khalil Raad – he studied photography in Basel (Switzerland) and opened up his shop near Jerusalem's Jaffa gate in 1895.² His daughter Najlaa carried on his tradition. She married a cameraman, Yohanis Krikorian, and worked with him in his studio.



"The YMCA in those years was a social and cultural center which offered the residents of Jerusalem a variety of entertainment of the best kind. The many sport facilities, the different youth clubs, the rich library, the auditorium, the cafeteria, were all of great service to the public. Young men from all over Palestine – law students, teachers, Government officials – who had to live away from their families and homes, occupied rooms in the YMCA hostel."⁴

"Our social life was busy, and our house was like a literary school. Writers and journalists from all over the world visited us, and just listening to their dinner conversations was in itself educational" Mary Shehade, journalist and wife of newspaper editor Boulos Shehadeh.⁵



Karima About worked as a professional photographer in 1913. She opened her own studio in Bethlehem to photograph women only. Karima took hundreds of pictures of Palestinian cities, women, and cultural life in Palestine. Karima passed away in 1940.³

Between 1911 and 1948, there were at least 161 newspapers, magazines, and other regular publications covering current news, literary news, arts, humor, sports, and medicine. These publications included the Arab Palestinian Medical Magazine (Jerusalem), the quarterly Arab Agriculture Magazine (Jerusalem), the Arab Economics Magazine (Jerusalem), the weekly Cinema and Film Magazine (Jerusalem), and the weekly Sports Life (Yaffa), the weekly literary magazine Al-Nahda (Haifa), and the Yaffa Chamber of Commerce's quarterly magazine.¹¹



Left: [Lamb, Charles Stories from Shakespeare, 1930: a translation of some of Shakespeare's popular stories into Arabic. The one depicted here is "Much Ado about Nothing". The letters SAK in the top right corner denote that the book belonged to Khalil Sakakini]

Hala Sakakini remembers that her mother subscribed to an English women's magazine called 'Wife and Home'. But Hala and her sister Dumiya preferred books. By the time Hala was seventeen, she had bought *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca*, and *the Citadel*.¹²



Orthodox School, Yaffa 1938

١٥ / ٦ / ٣٨
 المدرسة الاثوذكسية : يافا



Al-Dusturiyah School

Education

In 1914 there were 379 private Palestinian schools, 95 elementary schools and 3 secondary schools in Palestine. Among the prominent private schools were: a Christian Orthodox Girls' School in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, founded in 1858 by a Russian benefactress; the College des Freres in Jerusalem, founded by the Franciscan Order in 1875; St. George's British Anglican School for boys, founded in Jerusalem in 1899.¹³ There was also Al-Dusturiyah School, founded in Jerusalem in 1909 by Khalil Sakakini. It was the first school of its kind in Palestine, employing young teachers and the latest teaching methods of the time.

During the 1919-20 school year, 10,662 Palestinian students were enrolled in public government schools. In just three years (1922-3), the number of enrolled Palestinian students in public schools increased by 81% to 19,331.¹⁴

By 1942, Palestinians had the second highest elementary school enrollment rate among Arab countries after Lebanon.¹⁵

By 1947-48 there were 868 Palestinian schools, catering to 146,883 Palestinian students and run by 4,600 Arab teachers.¹⁶

Universities

There were no universities in Palestine before Nakba, except for a Law School that opened in Jerusalem in 1921 and a teachers' training college. But that did not stop Palestinians from furthering their education across the Arab world and beyond. In 1948, there were approximately 3000 Palestinian university students in universities worldwide, including 416 Palestinian university students studying in Lebanon, and 631 in Egypt, 3 in Syria, and 15 in Iraq.¹⁷

Some accomplished graduates:

GEORGE SABA SHIBR graduated with a degree in engineering in 1914 from a polytechnic institute in England. He taught at the Victoria College, Alexandria in 1918. In 1923, George was appointed as an engineer in the Islamic Waqf department in Jerusalem. He participated in the renovation of the Mosque of the Dome of the Rock, Al-Haram Al-Ibrahimi in Hebron, and the Nabi Samuel Mosque.¹⁸

Khalil Al-Budeiri studied Medicine in Germany (1922-23), Egypt (1924-25), and Geneva (1925-29); then specialized in Ophthalmology in London. He was arrested by the British authorities for his involvement in the 1936 General Strike and imprisoned for six months. He was appointed to the Palestinian delegation to the UN but the US refused him entry.¹⁹

Books

In 1927, there were 23 printing presses working in Palestine.²⁰

Between 1919 and 1944, 209 books were published in Palestine, addressing issues of literature, economics, politics, history, the sciences, and other fields. In addition, several other Palestinian works were published in Beirut, Damascus and Cairo, as well as in England, the United States and France.²¹ Palestinian books published in the 1930's include:

- It is Null and Void by Wadi Al Bustani (1936) on the Palestine Mandate.
- Palestine, Zionism and Colonialism by Ahmad Tarbeen (1939).
- Economic Organization of Palestine by Sa'id B. Hamadeh, professor of Applied Economics at the American University of Beirut (1938).
- Electric Power in Syria and Palestine by Basim Faris (1936).²²
- There were also dozens of internationally-known Palestinian scholars, such as²³:
- Yusuf Diya-uddin Pasha Al-Khalidi, a noted scholar in the 19th century who lectured at the University of Vienna. He wrote the first Arabic-Kurdish dictionary.
- Khalil Sakakini was a distinguished scholar and essayist. He was the founder of the Dusturiyah School in Jerusalem in 1909 and its headmaster. Among his books was Readings in Philology and Literature.
- Kuhl Al-Khalidi was a pioneer in modern historiography in the late 19th and early 20th century. He wrote, among other works, The Eastern Question, and A Comparative Study of Arabic and French Literature.
- Adil Zu'aiter was a lawyer and translator from French into Arabic. He translated works of Rousseau, Voltaire, Anatole France, Montesquieu and Lamartine.
- Ahmad Samih Al-Khalidi, who held a degree in Psychology from the American University of Beirut, was the author of several volumes on pedagogy that became standard textbooks in several Arab countries. He also translated into Arabic works by Maria Montessori and the German psychologist Wilhelm Stekel.
- Khalil Baydas was a Russian scholar and pioneer of the modern Palestinian novel. In 1898, he translated some of the works of Tolstoy and Pushkin into Arabic.
- George Antonius wrote The Arab Awakening, a history highly acclaimed in England and the United States. In 1930 he became Middle Eastern Associate at the Institute of World Affairs in New York.
- Mrs. Matiel Moghannam was a Palestinian feminist leader who wrote a book published in London in 1937, The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem.

اعيان الطرب والسورور في مدن فلسطين العامرة
بتصرف اظرفه الفلانتة بخير واتصرو واما فظفر العربية

تقديم	حاضرات
مسائل	من
حلاتها	احمد
مبت	واحد
الطنين	اللاتي
العمارة	

الانسة ام كلثوم
مع ارباب الصغرة من مصر الحارة

يوم الاحد والاحد 15/4/38	عند الساعة 10:00	القدس
حيفا	يافا	البحر

اجتهدوا في التمتع من اوتادها ليل ناعادها
والله اعلم بالصواب

Advertisement for Um Kalthoum concerts in Jerusalem, Yaffa and Haifa



Band - National sec. orth. school 15.4/38.

Advertisement for Um Kalthoum concerts in Jerusalem, Yaffa, and Haifa



Muslim Orphanage Band, Jerusalem 1946



Ticket for Um Kalthoum concert

Music

Musicians and theatre troops from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and other countries performed in Palestine. Stars like Um Kulthoum performed in Yaffa, Haifa, and other cities from the 1920's. People say that in one of Um Kalthoum's early performances in Haifa, a woman named her Kawkab Al-Sharq (The East's Star), which she became known as after that. Yousef Wihbeh also came with his theatre troupe to Yaffa between 1920 and 1930.²⁴

There were plenty of Palestinian musicians and singers too, like composer Yehya Al-Lababidi, musician Yousef Batroni, and singers Mary Akkawi and Rawhi Khamash to name a few.²⁵



*Music Band of
Palestine Broadcasting
Service, Jerusalem*



Music Band of Palestine Broadcasting Service, Jerusalem

Yehya Al-Lababidi composed music for over 150 songs and programs and children's songs, which were broadcast in the Palestine Broadcasting Service, where he was head of the Arab and Oriental music section. He wrote the lyrics and composed the music of Ya Reitni Teir wa Atir Hawaleik²⁶, which the famous Arab singer Farid Al-Attrash sang in 1937.²⁷

Rawhi Khamash started his music career in 1932 at the age of seven. In 1939, and upon finishing his music studies in Egypt, Khamash was appointed as head of the music band in the Palestine Broadcasting Service.



Advertisement for screening of Um Klthoum movie in Gaza's Samer Cinema, 1941 - Ghada Rabah's collection

Cinema

The French Lumiere brothers shot the first movie in Palestine as early as 1896.²⁸ The movie²⁹ was then screened in Palestine in Jerusalem's Europa Hotel in 1900.³⁰ Other filmmakers then came to Palestine from across Europe and shot movies.

There was Cinema Al-Ahli in Akka, owned by Haj Mohamad Al-Lababidi.³¹

There were also film distributors, like Aflam Al-Nil, owned by Yousef Al-Banna and Talhami³²

Dr. Ahmad Sidqi Al-Dajani remembers that the first film he ever saw was Al-Warda Al-Bidaa (The White Flower), starring Mohamad Abdel Wahab in Al-Hamra cinema in Yaffa.³³

By 1937, the Arab Cinema Company Ltd. was inviting the public to purchase its shares. The company has a capital of 5,000 shares, valued at one Palestinian guinea a share.³⁴

In 1945, Ibrahim Sirhan founded a production studio called Palestine studio and sought donations through advertisement in the Yaffa press. He was joined by Mohamad Kayali and together, they established the Arab Film Company production studio.³⁵

Egyptian films were also showing in Palestinian cinemas, like Ibn Al-Sahra (Son of the Desert), starring Badr Lama, an artist of Palestinian origin who together with his brother Ibrahim is credited with the founding of Egyptian cinema.³⁶



Yaffa's Al-Hamra Cinema and Theatre

Films & Film Makers

Ibrahim Sirhan produced the first Palestinian film in 1935. It was a 20-minute documentary about King of Saud's visit to Palestine. He then produced *Ahlam Tahaaqqat* (Dreams fulfilled) with singer Sayed Haroun and *Fi Laylat El-Eid* (On the Night of the Feast) and *Assifah Fil-Bayt* (A Storm at Home).³⁷

Mohamad Saleh Al-Kayali studied cinema and directing in Italy. He founded a photography studio in Yaffa in 1940. In 1946, he produced and directed several documentaries in Cairo like *Qa'idat Al-Idwan* (The Rule of Aggression)³⁸



Yaffa's Al-Hamra Cinema and Theatre

Drama

Between 1922 and 1948, there were at least 43 groups with drama companies and at least 70 plays had been performed, aside from those performed in schools.³⁹ Before 1948, there were at least 30 theatre troupes in Jerusalem alone.⁴⁰

There were many writers and pioneers in drama; many became known as proponents of modern Arabic literature:

Jamil Habib's successful novel *The Killer of his Brother* (a tragedy in three parts, published in 1919) was performed as a theater play in 1929 in Syria, Palestine, and other Arab countries.⁴¹ Jamil Al-Bahri wrote 12 plays before he died in 1930. Nasri al-Jowzi wrote 17 plays and Istfan Salem wrote 8. There was also Asma Al-Toubi; she wrote 4 plays.

The Palestinian novel emerged in 1920's. Khalil Baydas wrote *Al-Warath* (*The Inheritor*) in 1920. In the same year, Hayat Ba'da AL-Maout (*Life after Death*) by Iskandar Al-Beit-Jali was published. In 1946, modern Arab novel emerged with Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *Surakh fi-LaylTawil* (*A Scream in a Long Night*).

Literary criticism also thrived in Palestine. In 1904, Rouhi Al-Khalidi published *Tareekh 'Ilm Al-Adab 'Inda Al-Frank wal-'Arab* (*A History of the Study of Arab and Foreign Literatures*). Later on, Palestinian critics like Ihsan Abbas and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, backed the modernist poetry movement.⁴²

Notable Palestinian poets included Ibrahim Tuqan, IssamAbbasi, Muhammad Adnani, Jalal Zurayq, Kamal Nasir, and Fadwa Tuqan among many others.⁴³



NAKBA

"[My father] remembers his father hurrying everyone into the truck that would [My father] remembers his father hurrying everyone into the truck that would take them to Gaza. His mother was trying to fetch her sewing machine from the house. His father said 'don't worry we can collect it in two weeks when we come back. In Gaza, my father's mother, whenever she would sew or make clothes on her new sewing machine she would cry and he remembers asking her 'why are you crying?' and she [would say] because I miss my sewing machine in Beer Sheva.'"⁴⁴

Wassim Al-Saraj



UNRWA Archive

"We had been in so many different places I could not recognize where the sun rose and I thought it was rising from the west. [People] were running everywhere; they were like ants. Some people rented fishing boats to carry their things to Gaza. We did not take anything; I only carried my son on my back."

Um Jabr Wishah



UNRWA Archive

"A large wooden cupboard takes centre place in my vision. It is ivory white with a mirrored door, and right in front of it is a little girl of about five years old – me – squatting and looking into a wide open drawer at its bottom. My hands are buried deep inside the contents, and I remember, I recognize, almost feel the moment of the beginnings of my "silk road" unraveling right there from my grandmother's drawer. This was the place, the Aladdin cave, where she kept all the paraphernalia and knickknacks of sewing: threads, pins and needles, buttons and hooks, lace and beads, sequins and ribbon, and most of all swatches, patches, leftover material that remained and was kept after sewing clothes, lingerie, and household accessories... I lean on the Palestinian embroidered cushions on the sofa where I am sitting. They hold me tenderly and comfort me in what seems to be an eternal embrace of dazzling colors and designs. Palestinian embroidery remains ME, my passion, my identity, my 'silk road'."⁴⁵

Tania Tamari Nasir

"During this time looting of [Palestinian] houses started on a fantastic scale, accompanied by wholesale vindictive destruction of property... From our verandah we saw horse-drawn carts as well as pick-up trucks laden with pianos, refrigerators, radios, paintings, ornaments and furniture, some wrapped in valuable Persian carpets... Our friends' houses were being ransacked and we were powerless to intervene. At night the wind howled and the banging of windows and doors echoed through the lifeless buildings, a haunting sound in an already ghostly scene. It was unbearable to pass these houses"⁴⁶

John Rose



UNRWA Archive

"My father and his friends studied hard. Fighting was going on across the country. It was going on right there between Jaffa and Tel Aviv..Little imagining how radically their lives soon would be changed, they felt it was critical that they pass the end of year examinations- their future, they thought at the time, depended on it. So when Shafiq, my father's closest friend, lost his brother, my father insisted that he forgo the funeral procession in order to take his exams. When they showed up to sit for their exams, they found that the roof had been blown off the school in which the Palestinian matriculation exams were being administered. They carried on. By the time they heard the results on the radio several months later, it was the Jewish Education Department that announced them; there was no longer an Arab Department. My father was, by then, a refugee in Nablus, a West Bank town... He sent a telegram to Shafiq, now a refugee in Beirut. He remembers the irony: 'It was such a thrill- we passed! But there we were, refugees with no future'."⁴⁷

L. Abu Lughod

NAKBA FACTS

- Israeli militias and forces committed dozens of massacres during Nakba in which 15,000 Palestinians were killed.⁴⁸
- In 1948, Palestine's population was 1.2 million. During Nakba, approximately 800,000 Palestinians, around 67% of the population, were forcibly expelled from their homes, villages, and cities.
- During the Nakba, approximately 200,000 Palestinian refugees flooded into the Gaza Strip, thereby doubling its population almost overnight.
- Between 1947 and 1949, the Israeli army and militias drove out almost 90,000 Palestinian Christians, or about two thirds of the Palestinian Christian population of 117,450, from historic Palestine, along with hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians.⁴⁹
- On 11 December 1948, United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 194 (III), which resolved *"that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible"*. This resolution has since become the cornerstone of Palestinian policy regarding the plight of refugees. Additionally, in 2002, the Arab League adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, which also called for a *"just, comprehensive, and agreed-upon solution to the issue of refugees, based on UN General Assembly resolution 194"*.



UNRWA Archive

"A cultural landscape that reflected hundreds of years of sequent occupance [sic] was eradicated in some four decades... Places that were the loci for Palestinian culture and national identity, the vessels of a collective memory of the region's palimpsest-like cultural landscape, were obliterated in acts of de-signification."⁵⁰

Books

Amid the chaos of gunfire and massacre, the flight of terrified families and the destruction of homes and livelihoods, Jewish militias and civilian volunteers followed the Israeli soldiers with one goal in mind: to systematically trawl the recently evacuated [Palestinian] buildings and collect books and other culturally significant items. These books were handed to the National Library of Israel and documented using the letters AP "Abandoned Property".

A recent project entitled 'The Great Book Robbery' (<http://thegreatbookrobbery.org/>), sets out to build a virtual library of these books and find their legal heirs. One of the project's main features is a documentary, which tells this tragic story of the loss of these precious belongings, through interviews with the owners and their descendants. The books, as documented by 'The Great Book Robbery', span from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and cover a great variety of genres such as history, literature, poetry, language, religion, foreign books, technology, medicine, and even a governmental report of the school curriculum in 1947.

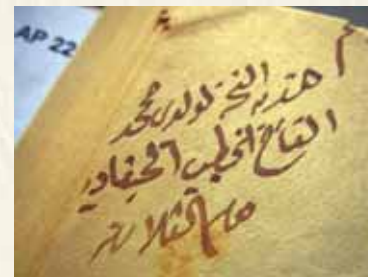


Israeli National Library



Books bearing AP mark, Israeli National Library

The majority of the books that are in the possession of the National Library of Israel are now kept in closed stacks and must be requested in order to view them. Some can be found amongst regular books on the shelves, displaying new record numbers but still bearing the tell-tale mark 'AP' on their spines. Many have pencil marks inside them denoting the original owner, such as SAK for Khalil Sakakini and NIMR for Muhammad Nimer al-Khatib.



One of Mohammad Nimer Al-Khatib's religious books included several names, dedications of prayer to keep the book safe, and a handwritten dedication from father to son.

Photograph has been kindly donated by Kara Francis, taken from Hannah Mermelstein 'Overdue Books: Returning Palestine's "Abandoned Property" of 1948', *Jerusalem Quarterly* 47, 2011



Storybook Kalila and Dimna, now among books marked 'AP' in Israeli National Library

"Years later the Israeli Custodian removed the veil of secrecy: 'The inspectors found most of the houses broken into, and rarely was there any furniture left,' he wrote in his memoirs. 'Clothes, household effects, jewelry, bedding-other than mattresses-never reached the warehouses of the Custodial authority.' ...More than 50,000 [Palestinian] homes had been abandoned, but only 509 carpets reached the Custodian's warehouses" - Tom Segev⁵¹

Taking Over Palestinian Property, Cultural Assets – A Timeline

April 1948

The Committee for Abandoned Property is created

1948-49

30,000 books "collected" from West Jerusalem alone. About 6000 given to the National Library of Israel, along with 40,000-50,000 collected from cities including: Jaffa, Haifa, Tiberias, Nazareth

June 1949

Jewish national library announces it "has gathered tens of thousands of abandoned books" and thanks the army for "the love and understanding...shown towards this undertaking"

1950

Custodian of Absentee Property declared "owner" of Palestinian property through Absentee Property Law

May 1954

Israel signs the Hague Convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict

EPILOGUE

Nakba for Palestinians is an unfinished journey of pain, loss, and injustice. The plight of approximately 7.1 million Palestinian refugees continues; their rights to recognition, return, compensation, and restitution remain unfulfilled. They constitute the majority of the Palestinian people and as such, their collective memory is that of their nation.

Nakba is also re-lived and remembered in Palestinians' daily lives. Its scenes of destruction and memories of loss, have been re-lived by thousands since 1948.

Since 1967, Israel has continued to displace hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, through its policy of home demolition and eviction.

According to United Nations and human rights organizations, Israeli authorities demolished 458 Palestinian homes and structures between 2009 and 2011 in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, displacing thousands of people. Some studies suggest that since it began its occupation of Palestinian Territory in 1967, Israel has demolished at least 18,000 Palestinian homes and structures.⁵²

"One institution most seriously affected was the Ministry of Culture where furniture was broken, equipment was wrecked or stolen, children's paintings were destroyed, books, pamphlets, documents, and disks were piled up and soiled with urine and faeces, and 'someone even managed to defecate into a photocopier'."⁵⁴

"[Thirty seven] years of fear, uncertainty, and reluctant lingering culminated within twenty harrowing minutes. As the family gathered on a nearby street the totality of their possessions were removed from the home and placed in a truck. The family were given a short time to reclaim these pieces of their past but most of the items had been destroyed during their hasty removal."⁵³

Personal testimony of the Hanoun family, Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, 2009

The assault on Palestinian culture also continues. One of the largest recent attacks took place March and April of 2002, when Israeli forces destroyed at least 30 libraries and other information collections. These included governmental archives, public and academic libraries, and libraries of nongovernmental organizations and private institutions.

Endnotes



UNRWA Archive

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