

Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: The Patrimony of Ihsan Nimr¹

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Ihsan al Nimr: 1905-1985 prominent Nablus historian, and author of many Ottoman histories of the region. Author of *Tarikh Jabal Nablus wal Balqa'*. *Photo source: Passia*



Archive fever is spreading among Palestinians everywhere. Whether in Ramallah or London, Haifa or San Francisco, Beirut or Riyadh, someone or some group is busy interviewing old people and compiling genealogies, searching for photographs and letters, collecting textiles and folksongs, visiting and renovating graveyards, scanning and repairing manuscripts, and compiling information on old houses and destroyed villages, and this is but the tip of an iceberg whose full dimensions can hardly be imagined.² This partial list does not include, for instance a host of historians, anthropologists and other scholars who have spent years doing field work in refugee camps or interrogating formal archival collections spread all over the world such as the central Ottoman archives, the British Public Records office, the registers of local Islamic courts, the papers of monasteries and churches, and the Zionist Archives. Nor does it include an

entire genre of memorial literature written mostly by laypersons about their families, villages, and towns, among other matters.

Of course, this is not an unusual obsession for any social group that experiences the traumas of dispossession and displacement on a massive scale as the Palestinians did in 1948. Nor is it unusual that the archival impulse is still strong six decades after that seminal event. After all, 1948 was not a moment, but a process that continues as I write. The appropriation of Palestinian land and control over the movement of Palestinians is a daily reality. Indeed, not a day passes without a Palestinian home full of memories and memorabilia being destroyed by Israeli bulldozers; or without some olive grove, patiently tended and referred to by name across the generations, being cleared out for the building of Jewish-only roads and settlements. We should also recognize that over the generations a proportion of what has been lost is due to negligence on the part of many Palestinians and the political organizations that have claimed authority over them.

None of this, however, fully explains the intensity of this activity over the past ten to fifteen years, or why this intensity has only increased instead of fading over time after the initial shock has worn off. That is to say, the archival urge must be historicized, and in recent times two important developments stand out. First, is the emergence of an archival democracy, so to speak. Digitalization and the internet have made it possible for the masses, if one may use that term without its usual baggage, to engage in archival activity. Anyone with access to a digital camera and/or sound recorder and a computer can share data files with millions of others and create a dense network of connections that can transcend geography if not always language and class. The possibilities are multiplied many times over for research institutes and think tanks with sophisticated facilities and multilingual researchers. The number of such organizations and their capacities have multiplied and matured over the years. Some of them-- the Institute for Palestine/Jerusalem Studies being one of the most venerable-- are digitizing and making publicly available, to a global network, a good part of the holdings they amassed over the decades.

The second, albeit it less sanguine, factor is a subjective one: the urgency to archive Palestine and the Palestinians is driven by a deep and widespread pessimism about the future. The more remote that freedom, justice, repatriation, and self-determination seem to be, the greater the desire to preserve and record for posterity not only what was then, but what is now. I mention the attraction of archiving the present, not just the past, because Palestinians are still incapable of stopping the continued and accelerating erasure of the two greatest archives of all: the physical landscape, and the bonds of daily life that constitute an organic social formation.³ This destructive process moved to the Occupied Territories in 1967 and has only picked up speed since Oslo. As if the strangulation of a social formation and the radical transformation of a landscape are not difficult enough, even more so is the widespread certainty that the current leaderships and their governing institutions are either disinterested in and/or

utterly incapable of protecting their own people, much less salvaging the Palestinian past and preparing for the future. Until a proper archival collections are established, therefore, it becomes incumbent on individuals, family associations, universities, think tanks, research centers, city clubs, student groups, and a wide range of non-governmental institutions (cultural, political, religious, charitable, and so on) to take matters into their own hands; hence the tremendous expansion in both technological and social spaces of archival activity.

This expansion has altered the very idea of what constitutes an archive. Specifically, it has pushed the meanings of archive horizontally, to include any possible trace of the past, as well as vertically to include the present itself, as if Palestine and the Palestinians are an endangered species about to become extinct. As a social historian who also dabbles with writing essays on the current Palestinian condition, this is an exciting and heady moment, as my archival and ethnographic parts are united.⁴ The times are certainly ripe for the Institute of Jerusalem Studies' conference on archives and family papers, and I would like to take this opportunity to step back a bit and reflect on three related issues: What is an archive? What is the history of the deployment of archives in the production of knowledge about Palestine and the Palestinians? And what new lines of inquiry into the past are unleashed by the intensive hunt for archives over the past two decades? By way of illustrating the last point, I will say a few words about the importance of family papers, using those collected by the local Nablusi writer, Ihsan Nimr, as a case in point.

What is an Archive?

The archive is a self-evident concept. At least, that is the impression one gets when surveying discussions about and announcements of archival finds (or losses) among Palestinian individuals and organizations. The assumption is that archives --whether serial collections of documents generated by institutions, types of structures in the built environment, or private papers and photographs-- are a singular product of historical processes that do not repeat themselves. Hence, they constitute a one-of-a-kind "raw material" waiting to be discovered and processed in order to tell factual stories about the past. Inert and frozen in time, they are akin to buried treasures that can be unearthed through patient detective work. Archives, therefore, are seen as pre-existing the collector/researcher and outside of him/her. Stories of "discoveries" now abound as the patter of archival raindrops that held steady until the early 1990s has turned into a heavy downpour in recent years. Some individuals have even made a profession out of archival treasure hunts with the explicit purpose of affirming the existence of a sophisticated Palestinian society prior to its destruction in 1948 and to demonstrate the ways that Palestinians are tied to and belong to the land of Palestine.⁵

It is more useful, perhaps, to think of the notion of archives as product of a relationship between scholars and textual genres in specific historical contexts. A critical perspective on the labor of the scholar that focuses on the implications of choice and method is needed. Why are some things perceived as constituting archival material and not others? What kinds of archives are called into being by specific lines of inquiry and how do these lines of inquiry simultaneously silence others? A critical perspective is also needed for archives, especially serial collections of documents. We can think of an archive as a “system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.”⁶ In this sense, the archive is an authorizing discursive field that naturalizes some stories about the past and, by implication, silences others. A critical reading of documents deemed, as a collectivity, to constitute a distinct archive, requires deconstructing the language and structure of the text itself in order to expose its epistemological genealogy.

Two brief points can be made here. First, it is evident that the same sets of archival sources have been and continue to be read, represented, and consumed in a large variety of contrasting and sometimes contradictory ways. A particularly relevant example is travel literature, one of the several textual genres generated by the rediscovery of Palestine as the Holy Land in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some scholars depend heavily on this literature as an accurate description of contemporary realities, while others subject it to a post-colonialist reading as evidence not of native realities, but of the Orientalist perspective. Still other scholars consider it completely unreliable and refuse to grant this literature the rank of archive to begin with.

Second, specific sets of archives periodically appear and disappear from the radar screens of scholars. Locally generated archives, such as Islamic court records (*sijillat al-mahakim al-shar`iyaa*) and family papers, have been all the rage over the past generation. So much so that one would think they are newly discovered and/or their significance was only recently understood. These collections of texts, however, have been available for over a century. More to the point, they were used by both professional and amateur historians from the 1920s to the 1940s, only to be ignored and forgotten over the next five decades. Asad Rustum, the foremost historian of a seminal moment in the modern history of Greater Syria—the Egyptian occupation, 1831-1840—used both types of sources with great effect and much of his work is yet to be surpassed in this regard.⁷ Another example is the four volume history of Jabal Nablus by Ihsan Nimr, who based it almost entirely on what would later become fashionable sources: oral history, family papers that he collected, and Islamic court records. Archives, it seems, appear and disappear depending on prevailing academic norms and ideological blinders.⁸

The current archival fever, therefore, puts too much emphasis on discoveries of sources as *external objects* and not enough on the *relationship between persons and texts* that can make archives speak. The bottleneck facing those anxious to study

Palestine and the Palestinians is not the lack of sources, even of the kind generated by the Palestinians themselves. Rather, it is, in part and with some important exceptions, the resistance of the big ideological currents—nationalism, political Islam, Orientalism—to apply critical perspectives on both texts and the labor of the researcher.⁹ It is also the lack of human resources (and the institutions that house them). There is a serious shortage of professional archivists, librarians, conservationists, and information technology workers who can organize, preserve, and make accessible in the proper manner and format the vast but highly fragmented constellation of archives already identified. There is also a shortage of well-trained researchers and scholars: anthropologists, historians, sociologists, demographers, architects, art historians, folklorists, and the like who can turn the sources into narratives.

From Palestine to the Palestinians: The Deployment of Archives Since 1750

There are usually at least two key moments of archive formation : The moment of production of the text itself, such as the keeping of a legal register by a scribe, and the moment of deployment of that text by a scholar at some future point as an archival source. In modern times, both moments are usually forms of producing nations and collectivities, and the power relations within and between them.¹⁰ A schematic survey of archive formation and deployment in modern times, yields three discrete chronological periods during which the focus gradually shifts from Palestine to the Palestinians. There is nothing necessarily inevitable about this shift and, as befits the nature of historical sources, there is an accretion and overlapping effect. No possibilities are foreclosed, and what was once a secondary work of interpretation becomes an archival sources in its own right. Still, it is useful to briefly outline the three periods.

The first, largely dominant from the 18th to early 20th centuries and still very much in play today, focused on Holy Land and The Holy Book as the primary archives in order to tell stories, in the name of God and civilization, about the place of Europe and the Christians in the world. This involved literally tracing the footsteps of Jesus Christ and documenting that itinerary using the Bible as the story frame, with the latest technological gadgets, such as the camera and new surveying techniques, as the tools. The scientific discovery of Biblical narratives led, over the decades, to the formation of new academic disciplines and textual genres, such as Biblical geography and archaeology. A useful metaphor for the many genres that would later become archives in their own right, are the tripod, the shovel, and the notebook. The three-legged wooden frame stands for the production of image and landscape, the dominant form of representing and measuring Palestine as the Holy land: the easel for painting, drawing, and etchings; and the tripod for photographers and surveyors who produced books on Biblical geography. The shovel stands for what became at the time the enormously

influential new science of Biblical archaeology, the concerns and consequences of which are as contentious and influential today as they were then. The notebook stands for the European gaze, especially as instantiated in travel literature, missionary reports, and memoirs --all of which are eagerly collected and still widely cited today.

From the late 19th century to the present, the state (in the records of its many bureaucratic institutions) becomes the primary archive for stories about the destiny of peoples and nations. The belief in the onset of an age of linear progress, hence the beginning of History (with a capital h), is almost universally associated in the works of scholars with Western/capitalist penetration/integration as the original external stimulus, and with the idea of the state as an engineer, meaning the imposition of a comprehensive program of military, fiscal, social, economic, and legal reforms from above. Naturally, therefore, two types of archives have dominated as sources for research: British, French, German, and other European archives, both of state and non-state institutions, from the pre-colonial to the post colonial periods); and Ottoman imperial archives, both central and local, from the Tanzimat era to World War I.

These archive primarily focus on three constellations of practices. First, is counting: population census, conscription ledgers, and taxation records--all based on the individual, not the family, household, village, or neighborhood. Records of these largely resisted state initiatives along with those devoted to commercial counting, such as of imports and exports, provide much of what is considered to be the "hard data" of Ottoman and Mandate Palestine. Second is governance: new administrative institutions such as municipality councils, new educational establishments such as military institutes, new forms of communication and transportation such as the telegraph and railroad, and so on. All, of course, produced paperwork by the kilo and their institutional histories are grist for the mill of modernization narratives. Third, is the legal fabrication of property and notions of right. Of special note here in relation to Palestine is the new Ottoman land law of 1858 and the codification of Islamic Law in the 1870s. Thus, there is a clear shift in the archival base from the Biblical landscape to the state. People, largely absent in the first, appear in the second mostly as objects to be counted and governed. This shift in emphasis, especially popular among scholars in the post-colonial period interested in socio-economic and political modernization, called into being a new set of archives and opened up entirely new dimensions of historical inquiry.

Starting in the early 20th century then again after a roughly five-decade gap, society becomes the primary archive for historical narratives and the Palestinians, not Palestine. Sociologists, anthropologists, and social historians turned native populations and the sources they produced into archives. Locally generated sources are especially well suited to shedding light on the social, economic, cultural, intellectual, and legal histories of marginalized social groups, geographic regions, and time periods. Peasants, merchants, women, and others became of interest to scholars, as did places other than the often studied cities of Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa. Similarly, the

long neglected period from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, hitherto considered to be one of decline and stagnation, emerged a key a formative era credited with deeply shaping modern Palestinian society, economy, and political culture.

The expansion in lines of inquiry from the land to the state to society has resulted in a broadening of the concept of archive to include a highly diverse constellation of sources. Family papers, the topic of the Institute's conference, is one of the most promising as family is a nexus of both interest (material practices) and emotions (subjectivity). Oral history and culture involving memory, language, myth, and folklore has also been central to the work of scholars. Another is material culture. This includes the built environment (such as architecture, dwellings, public spaces, urban and rural geographies); artisan production (such as wood work for tourists and the soap industry), consumption patterns (such as household goods), sartorial regimes (types of clothes and regional differences), food, music, bodily decoration, medical practices and so on. This is not to mention locally produced archives such as legal texts (Islamic court records, *fatwa* collections, commentaries); historical texts (biographical dictionaries and chronicles), literary texts (poetry, prose, fiction), and personal texts (diaries, letters).

The Family Papers of Ihsan Nimr: A Scholar-Gentleman

By way of a quick example of family papers, a few words can be said about the collection compiled by Ihsan Nimr (1905-1985). A scion of a long-time ruling family in Nablus, Ihsan Nimr largely lived off the revenues from family properties and, in the tradition of a scholar-gentleman, devoted most of his energies to writing and political activism. His is an inside out history of Jabal Nablus, especially of the important families that lived in this social space, that were central to the history of the highlands of Palestine. Since the Nimr family moved to Nablus and became prominent in Ottoman times, this was naturally the period and the political formation on which Ihsan Nimr lavished his scholarly attention and no small measure of nostalgia.

Nimr's key work, *Tarikh Jabal Nablus wa al-Balqa'* (four volumes, 1938-1974), is based largely on private papers he collected from numerous families, on oral interviews and popular memory, on the records of the Islamic court, on collections of material objects, and on local architectural styles, among other items.. These types of texts that he treated as archival sources differed completely from the ones that most western-educated scholars used at the time (with the exception of a few, such as Asad Rustum). Indeed, Nimr's idea of archives would not come into vogue in the US and the European Academy until the 1980s. Nimr perceived the Ottoman period as the golden age of Islamic justice, and he sought to illustrate that through a highly textured narrative, yet one with encyclopedic breadth. Neither would have been possible if it were not for this particular configuration of locally generated sources that he depended on so heavily and that allowed him, of course, to exaggerate the importance of Nablus and of the Nimr family.¹¹



Letter from Ahmad agha to his son, Abd al-Fattah, updating him on the family business (1250 Hijri / 1834 C.E). Due to the Nimr family opposition to the Egyptian occupation, Ahmad Agha was later forced into exile in Egypt and came back sick and blind. Abd al-Fattah was forced to serve in the Egyptian military. *Source: author's collection.*

I am not certain whether what was made available to me almost twenty-five years ago comprises his entire collection or a part of it. Nor do we know if the originals survived in the early 1990s when his house was broken into and apparently vandalized. In any case, what I have are about 380 documents spanning the 17th to 19th centuries written in both Ottoman Turkish and Arabic. Most date from the period following the Egyptian occupation of Nablus in 1831, a regime which severely undermined the material base and political power of the Nimr family. No doubt, the impulse to preserve documents, especially contracts and court decisions, became an important part of the effort to rebuild the Nimr family as a corporate entity in the city of Nablus after the Egyptian forces left in 1840. Judging the from temporal clumps of the documents, much of that impetus came from the leader of the family in 1840s and 1850s, Abd al-Fattah Nimr.



Account book of Yusufiyya soap factory: Income, Expenses, Profits (1241 Hijri/ 1825/1826 C.E.). *Source: author's collection.*

The collection includes several categories of documents. Official documents from the Ottoman state, such as *timar* and *malikanah* grant deeds and appointments to official positions were prominent. The largest group is property and commercial transactions: The purchase and sale of land and houses, account ledgers for a soap factory, money-lending, receipts, and contracts. There were also many legal documents, such as lawsuits and *waqf*-related documents such as endowments, exchange, rent, lease, and rebuilding of *waqfs*. With a couple of minor exceptions, there are no personal texts such as letters, diaries, and the like.

The limitations of the Nimr family papers are obvious. They are relatively few in number, the coverage is uneven, and a copy of many of the documents generated by the Islamic court can be found in the court records. I was able to find, for example, identical texts of all five major *waqf* endowment deeds as well as almost all the lawsuits, for example. I assume it would be possible, given enough time, to locate copies of many of the state-issued documents, such as *timar* grants, in the Central Ottoman Archives. Nevertheless, the very composition of this collection is highly informative about the textual culture of the times and about what types of documents were deemed important for posterity. It is particularly significant, for example, that this collection brings together a variety of genres into “bundles” of relations. This allows the researcher to construct a long-term perspective on the social lives of people and things (such as a soap factory or residence). What is included or excluded from the bundles are also indicative of changing worldviews and relationship between the text and the individual. And even if copies are available, originals differ in ways that are very important for paleography, history of textual production, and archival anthropology.

Occasionally, family papers include rare documents that open up new fields of research. For example, the Nimr papers included several personal contracts concluded outside the purview of the Islamic court or any other state institution. One such is the *salam* (forward purchase) contract, possibly the most important economic mechanism between urban and rural populations for that period. Those of the Nimr family are the only ones known to exist so far for the Ottoman period in Bilad ash-Sham. Other examples include the account books of Abd al-Hadi family that allowed pioneering work by Ya’akov Firestone on the political economy, legal regimes, and social relations between large landowners and peasants in Palestine during the second half of the nineteenth century, an intensive period of capitalist transformation.¹² Yet another example for the Abd al-Hadi papers are records of the Nablus Consultative Council (*majlis ash-shura*) for the period 1848-1852. The Municipal Council dealt with fiscal, criminal, administrative, and commercial issues outside the purview of the Islamic court, thus offering a rare look into the political economy of this region.¹³

Family papers, like other locally generated archives, help write Palestinians into history and make their society come to life with texture and nuance. Their focus is firmly on people, not just on the Holy Land or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Systematic collection, organization, and research into such archives can open new political horizons by showing the richness and diversity of Palestinian communities and their struggles for survival during very difficult times. Such an effort can also lay a foundation for the establishment of a popular Palestinian archive as well as prove to be an important training ground for a new generation of Palestinian scholars.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This essay is based on a longer paper delivered (in Arabic) at the conference “Family Papers and Public Archives as Sources for Research in the Social History of Palestine,” organized by the Institute for Jerusalem Studies and held at Birzeit University on 25 and 26 July 2008. The longer paper benefited from the comments of Salim Tamari, Issam Nassar, and Samera Esmeir. This essay briefly summarizes some of the main points.
- ² It is imperative to carry out a survey of the more serious efforts in these regards and to make publicly available as many of the findings as possible.
- ³ If one could flash through a series of daily satellite photos since 1948, as cartoon artists do with their drawings, one of the world’s most rapid and massive transformations in topography, demography, and the built environment would instantly come to life. These days, those absent from Jerusalem for more than year at a time can hardly, upon their return, recognize once familiar parts of the city and the road networks that lead to it.
- ⁴ These remarks are derived from a lecture given by the author in the conference referred to above.
- ⁵ For example, Ahmad Mruwat, who can be reached at nazaretharchive@gmail.com
- ⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (New York, 1972), p. 129. “Event” is the exact translation of the word (*haditha*) that is used in the Islamic court records to refer to the moment that gives birth to document itself.
- ⁷ Rustum, Asad. 1936. *The Royal Archives of Egypt and the Origins of the Egyptian Expedition to Syria, 1831-1841*. Beirut: American press.
- ⁸ By the same token, they are potentially infinite, the only limits being our imagination and available technological capabilities. Who would have imagined, a century ago, that DNA would become a major archive for social scientists?
- ⁹ Two of the several important exceptions are the work of scholars associated with the Institute for Jerusalem Studies, MADA, and Riwaq, among others. The work of Isam Nassar on photographs as an historical archive of Palestine and the Palestinians is one example. Another is the work of Salim Tamari on family papers as an archive for the social and cultural history of urban life in Palestine at the turn of the 20th century.
- ¹⁰ Nationalist ideologies fetishize the notion of archives, eager as they are to prove that there is a “scientific” basis for the claims they make. This is especially the case when the past is subject to contestation between competing nationalist groups. This is why archives can easily become a theater for aggressive interventions. Archival collections are raided, stolen and sometimes destroyed. They are subjected to specific regimes of access and organized into different sets of components, pre-suggesting specific relationships, themes, and temporalities –thus making certain topics and approaches both inevitable and highly desirable.
- ¹¹ He wrote during a period of political gestation. It is not entirely clear from his books which of his many proud identities –Nablusi, Muslim, Arab, Ottoman, Palestinian—he valued most. Perhaps that partly explains his openness to a wide variety of archives sources.
- ¹² Firestone, Ya’akov. 1973. *Production and Trade in an Islamic Context: Sharika Contracts in the Transitional Economy of Northern Samaria, 1853-1943*. [Boston]: [s.n.].
- ¹³ Lubna Abd al-Hadi drew my attention to these records. Only two *majlis shura* registers for Bilad al-Sham have been found: One for Damascus in 1841, and Aleppo in 1837.