

Ali Za'rur and Early Palestinian Photojournalism

The Archive of Occupation and the Return of Palestinian Material to Its Owners

Rona Sela

Various research has been written about Palestinian photography¹ but little is known about Ali Za'rur,² one of the pioneers of Palestinian photojournalism. This article aims to expand information in this area, especially with regards to Palestinian history, culture and knowledge – archives and materials – that are controlled, manipulated and erased by Israeli colonial archives in repressive ways to benefit the colonizer.

Za'rur (1901–1972) was born in the village of al-'Ayzariya (figure 1), in the region of Jerusalem, to a family of farmers and sheep breeders. Seeking an urban environment, and disliking village life, he moved to Jerusalem. There he met a photographer named Hananiya from whom he learned the art of photography. Very little is known about Hananiya's work, other than his studio was located at Jaffa gate outside the wall, an area where many non-Jewish photographers had shops – Palestinians, Armenians and others, such as Khalil Ra'd, Garabed Krikorian,³ Miltiades Savides, and, inside Jaffa Gate, the American Colony photographers. This area thus served as the first Palestinian visual arts center (figure 2), and it is reasonable to assume it had an influence on Za'rur.

Between 1936 and 1942 Ali Za'rur photographed for the British, first in the Jerusalem area and then from 1942–1945 in the Gaza area. Around 1947 Ali Za'rur began working for the Associated Press and the Jordanian Army. He was the photographer for the Jordanian military during the life of King Abdullah, which allowed him to photograph and move about freely.⁴ In 1948 he photographed the battle in Jerusalem, mainly in the Old City, giving witness to the events and consequences from an Arab-Palestinian perspective. After 1948, Za'rur moved his photography studio into the Old City, close to

the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and today the studio still operates, managed by his grandchildren. In the late 1950s, Ali Za'rur began photographing pilgrims and tourists at the church, which his son and grandchildren continue to do.⁵ After the Israeli army occupied the Old City in 1967, Za'rur, according to his son Zaki, continued to work for the Associated Press as well as to make studio portraits and documentary work. Ali Za'rur died on 1 April 1972.

In 2000 I presented the work of Ali Za'rur in a group exhibition, which was accompanied by a book. The show and the book were entitled *Photography in Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s*, the first time Za'rur's work has been published in book form. I had learned of Ali Za'rur a year earlier when Ami Steinitz introduced his photographs in an exhibition and later in an article, both named "Region of Distance."⁶ Soon after, I met his son Zaki Za'rur (figure 3), and viewed prints from his original negatives taken in Jerusalem during the 1948 war. Before, during, and after the Nakba, as well as other wars, Palestinian archives, albums, and images were seized by Israeli forces, looted by individuals, or lost.⁷ In 2007, in the Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archive (IDFA), the central military archive in Israel which manages the various military archives in the country,⁸ I discovered four hundred of Ali Za'rur's original photographs. They were photographed during the 1948 war, bound in four photo albums. The photos had been censored after being put into the archive. Thirty-five years later, in 2002, they were declassified after the period of restriction ended,⁹ and following approval by the legal advisor for the IDFA. The photographs were opened together with a large group of other photographs from the 1948 war, among them photographs by Khalil Rissas.¹⁰ According to Zaki Za'rur, the albums had been bound originally into a single thick album containing his father's finest work from the war, and up until 1967 had been in the possession of the photographer's family. The album was then, according to some accounts, obtained by an The Jerusalem Foundation, which transferred it to the IDFA. The large album was separated at the IDFA into four smaller albums, rearranged and catalogued according to



Figure 1. "Al-'Ayzariya at the beginning of the twentieth century." Photo by Khalil Ra'd, courtesy of Ra'd Family.



Figure 2. "View looking down Jaffa Road, 1898–1914." Photo by American Colony Photographers: left: the studio of Krikorian; right: the studio of Ra'd and Savides. Matson collection, Library of Congress.

their norms and procedures, and the Israeli perspective. There are a number of versions of how the album first reached the reached The Jerusalem Foundation in 1967, as we will see below.¹¹

This article continues my ongoing research into the way Palestinian history and culture is concealed, reinterpreted, and written in the Israeli colonial archives for the benefit of the colonizer, subjugated to colonial norms and patterns. It charts the methods used by Israel to control Palestinian historical and cultural materials and documentation (but also materials of importance to Palestinians taken by Jewish/Israeli sources), erasing them from the public sphere by repressive means, censoring and restricting their exposure and use, altering their origin and identity, controlling their contents and subjugating them to Israel's laws, rules, and terminology.¹²

The Albums

In 2007 I reviewed files bearing the heading “Jerusalem” and classified as “Arab sources” in the IDFA. After close examination I realized they were reproductions of photographs; many of them I recognized as Ali Za'rur's photographs that I had exhibited or seen in 2000. I asked the IDFA photography archivist whether the original photographs used for the reproductions were still in the archive. After a lengthy and complex process and repeated



Figure 3. Zaki Za'rur and author at Za'rur's home, with a portrait of Ali Za'rur at top left, al-'Ayzariya, 2007.

requests, a dusty box with a label imprinted with the word “Jerusalem” was “found.” Inside were four cloth-bound albums containing Ali Za'rur's original photographs.¹³ The 8 cm x 13 cm photos carried the stamp – “Ali Za'rur, Press Photographer, Jerusalem” – and substantially matched the negatives held by Zaki Za'rur.¹⁴ The albums in the archive had been altered by IDFA workers: they were renumbered and recaptioned with an Israeli narrative of the war in Jerusalem, and the photographer's name deleted.¹⁵

Examination of the albums shows that they had been reviewed apparently by Jewish soldiers who had fought in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1948, to identify details. Probably the albums had been investigated because they documented the battle in the Jewish quarter. In a number of cases, information was written in Hebrew on the photographs, notes were affixed below the pictures, or corrections were made in Hebrew in ink to a handwritten list that unidentified person/soldier/archivist had edited. The former soldiers signed their names next to the comments they made,¹⁶ thus marking the photographs as having completed the occupation process.

In my experience, the fact that the archived Palestinian photographs were researched is unusual. Generally, the IDFA does not investigate Palestinian materials or concern itself with examining their context and contents or their sources. It seems the archive's interest in these photographs was entirely from a Zionist perspective, that is, to subjugate them to tell the Israeli narrative; any other information of Palestinian importance, such as the photographer's identity, the world he sought to represent, or the context of the photographs, was not investigated, and was deleted deliberately. For example, the IDFA staff did not bother to document the photographer's name in the archive catalogue although the photographer's stamp was clearly on the back of the photographs. The Hebrew descriptions that deface the Palestinian photographs symbolize a statement of ownership.¹⁷ Moreover, the Zionist terminology used to describe the Palestinian photographs demonstrates again how their original history was erased and replaced by a new narrative. The original contents were reinterpreted and matched the narrative of the occupier. Za'rur did prepare a typewritten list of his work, but only a small part of it survived, or was utilized in the occupation archive. The title “Jerusalem” imprinted on the new box looks as if it was taken from the old album which, according to Zaki Za'rur, was black.

An examination of the IDFA records reveals that in April 1977 the album was received as a donation from the Jerusalem Foundation.¹⁸ At the same time, the foundation forwarded other photographs of Palestinians to the IDFA, for example, of the Palestinian resistance in Jaffa in 1933. How did the album reach the Jerusalem Foundation? Over the years there have been a number of different answers. According to the first version, after the occupation in 1967, a member of the Za'rur family gave the album as a gift to Teddy Kollek, then mayor of Jerusalem, and he apparently transferred it to the Jerusalem Foundation. In another version, the family member gave the album to a friend in Talbiyya, who transferred it to Teddy Kollek, or directly to the Jerusalem Foundation at that period.¹⁹ Whatever the case, Kollek and the Jerusalem Foundation were interested in the photographs detailing the battle in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1948, as described below.

For thirty years, the albums lay in the IDFA gathering dust, without anyone locating or



Figure 4. "Palestinian Refugees, 1948." Photo by Ali Za'rur.

seeking their owner or giving him an appropriate credit, mute and subject to censorship and the strict laws of the IDFA and its Zionist lexicon. The original photographs were reproduced, and the reproductions were made public in 2002, the captions subjugated to the Zionist narrative. The original photographs in the albums, with the photographer's stamp, catalogue number, and description, continued to be buried in the IDFA. In 2007, after the original photograph albums were "discovered," as well as the name of the photographer, the albums were closed to review. Upon the request of the Za'rur family, the IDFA returned the albums to their owners. Although Za'rur's album was not seized or looted, this is an important precedent, when discussing the necessity to demand the return of Palestinian archive materials held by Israel, based on the moral, ethical, proprietary, and legal rights of the Palestinian over the materials.²⁰

The Battle over Visual Representation of the 1948 War in Jerusalem

The battle for Jerusalem was the longest running in the 1948 war and lasted for approximately one year (December 1947 to December 1948). The Arabs placed significant importance on Jerusalem and saw it as one of the main arenas in the struggle. Thus, already in the first few months they began gathering many forces from Palestine in the city and from Mount Hebron, and from other Arab countries – mainly Arab Legion fighters. Za'rur photographed in Jerusalem throughout the war and documented almost the entire campaign. His work is unique in that it allows us to see for the first time the documentation of the battle for the Old City of Jerusalem, especially in the vicinity of the Jewish Quarter, and the various events in Jerusalem during the 1948 war, from the

Arab-Palestinian perspective. His photos show that he photographed the war mainly in the city of Jerusalem. Another Palestinian photographer, Khalil Rissas, worked in and around Jerusalem but unlike Za'rur he photographed wider areas of the Jerusalem region, not only the city, but the mountains, Dayr Ayyub, and Bethlehem. Until my exhibition that includes the work of Ali Za'rur and Khalil Rissas in 2000, most of what was known about the visual representation of the battle for Jerusalem was primarily from two sources: photographs taken during the war by the Welsh photographer John Phillips, and the film *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer*, a reconstruction of the battle for the Old City of Jerusalem, described by Jack Padwa and produced with the assistance of Israel military in 1955.²¹ Both are sympathetic to the Zionist cause. Za'rur's photographs expose additional documentation of the period from an entirely new perspective.

In May 1948, John Phillips, the photographer for *Time-Life*, accompanied the Arab Legion forces commanded by Abdullah al-Tal (under the Jordanian Legion commander General John Bagot Glubb, "Glubb Pasha") in the war in the eastern part of the city, and the Jewish Quarter in the Old City, in particular. The quarter was under siege and Jewish fighters had barricaded themselves inside. Jerusalem was King Abdullah's main priority. The plan of the Jewish Haganah forces to conquer the Old City and the attacks along the line between east and west Jerusalem from May 13 to May 18 prompted the king to act.²² Phillips, because of his good relations with King Abdullah, was attached to the Legion and wore the Legion uniform. "For the first time since February," he writes, "I had no fear that some paranoid Moslem would try to lynch me for taking pictures. I was in the Legion uniform and treated with respect by the populace, who mistook me for a British officer serving in the Arab army."²³ This allowed him to document the battles from the position of the Legion, with the ability to move around freely without fear. However, unlike



Figure 5. "Monastery in the Old City of Jerusalem damaged by shell," 1948. Photo by Ali Za'rur.

British General Glubb Pasha, who was perceived as pro-Arab, Phillips identified mostly with the Jewish side. He explains his choice to identify with the besieged fighters in the Jewish quarter in the introduction to his book *A Will to Survive*: "anyone would assume I must be Jewish to have taken 'such compassionate pictures'."²⁴ He claims:

No Jewish photographer could have shot the pictures I did.... The rampaging Arabs would have killed him. Being a white Anglo-Saxon was no help either. Conditions were such that anyone with a camera was considered a

Jewish spy and promptly set upon. I managed to get the pictures ... only because I was in the uniform of the Arab Legion Aware that the sack of the Jewish Quarter would shock the western world, Arab authorities across the Middle-East tried to prevent the news from leaking out I knew my pictures on the agony of the Jewish quarter would end up in a censor's wastepaper basket. I did not want this to happen and decided to smuggle them out of the Middle East. There was some risk, but I took the chance.

On 21 September 1976, John Phillips's exhibition *A Will to Survive* opened at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, initiated by Teddy Kollek and supported by the Jerusalem Foundation. The selected images and the text that Phillips attached to them and in the accompanying book by the same name expressed open sympathy for the Zionist side. The exhibition featured Phillips's photographs of the battles in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City in 1948. The exhibition also included photographs of the newly renovated Jewish Quarter and people who earlier had appeared in the images from 1948, and were then located and photographed again.

In contrast to Phillips, Ali Za'rur was a Palestinian and the official photographer of the Jordanian king and army. Like Phillips, he also wore the Jordanian army uniform, giving him access to the battles that took place between the Jordanian Legion and the Jewish Haganah forces and, after May 1948, the Israeli military forces, including events and battles in the Old City of Jerusalem. Phillips and Za'rur photographed events at the same crucial moments,²⁵ and many of their images are very similar. However, they tell the events from different perspectives. Phillips photographed the Arabs looting Jewish houses, the famous picture of a Jewish girl crying out, the horror of the Jewish wounded, the helplessness on the Jewish side, and others. Za'rur, on the other hand, exposed the damage to the Palestinian side caused by the war, including photographs of bodies (photographs censored by the Israeli central military archive), refugees and the Palestinian struggle. Years later, Phillips exhibited his images at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and a few months after the exhibition, the Jerusalem Foundation transferred Za'rur's album to the IDFA.²⁶ Za'rur's photographs were not shown in the exhibition in Jerusalem and were buried for three decades in the IDFA and subordinated to Israel's narrative. They were subjugated, like many other Palestinian treasures, to the authority and procedures of the colonial archive.

Rona Sela is a curator and researcher of visual history and art, whose research focuses on the visual, historiography of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and archiving in colonial contexts. This article could not have been achieved without the essential and generous assistance of Zaki Za'rur (1942–2010) and his family.

The author would like to acknowledge that this research and article could not have been achieved without the essential and generous assistance of Zaki Za'rur (1942–2010) and his family. The images published here were originally published in Photography in Palestine in 2000 with the generous permission of Zaki Za'rur and his family.

Endnotes

- 1 See relevant works by Rona Sela: *Photography in Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2000); Rona Sela, *Made Public: Palestinian Photographs in Military Archives in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Helena and Minshar Gallery, 2009) [in Hebrew] and (Ramallah: Madar Center, 2018) [in Arabic]; exhibition catalogue, *Khalil Ra'd, Photographs 1891–1948* (Tel-Aviv: Gutman Art Museum, 2010); “Rethinking National Archives in Colonial Countries and Zones of Conflict: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Israel’s National Photography Archives as a Case Study,” *IBRAAZ* (Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East) 28 January 2014, online at www.ibraaz.org/essays/78 (accessed 19 June 2018); “Rethinking National Archives in Colonial Countries and Zones of Conflict,” in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); “The Genealogy of Colonial Plunder and Erasure – Israel’s Control Over Palestinian Archives,” *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 201–229; “Seized in Beirut – The Plundered Archives of the Palestinian Cinema Institution,” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 12, no. 2 (2017); “The Archive of Photo Rissas (Rassas) – Ibrahim and Khalil (Khalil) Rissas – Looted and Controlled in Israel’s Military Archives,” *Intermedialités/ Intermediality* no. 32 (forthcoming). See also Issam Nassar, “A Jerusalem Photographer: The Life and Work of Hanna Safieh,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 7 (2000): 24; “Familial Snapshot: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographer,” *History & Memory* 18, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 139–55; *Laqatat mughayira: al-taswir al-futugrafi al-mubakir fi Filastin* [Different Snapshots: Palestine in Early Photography] (Beirut and Ramallah: Kutub and Qattan Foundation, 2005) and “Early Local Photography in Palestine: The Legacy of Karimeh Abbud,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (Summer 2011): 23–31. See also Vera Tamari, *Palestine before 1948, Not Just Memory, Khalil Ra'd (1854–1957)* [in English and Arabic] (Ramallah: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2013); *Karima 'Abbud: Pioneer of Female Photography in Palestine* [in Arabic] (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2011).
- 2 The information about Ali Za'rur is taken primarily from my conversations with his son, Zaki Za'rur, between 1999 and 2008, from Ami Steinitz in 1999 and 2000 and from further research. See Ami Steinitz, “Region of Distance,” Ami Steinitz Gallery, May–June 1999, Tel Aviv; Ami Steinitz, “Region of Distance,” *Studio Art Magazine* 113 (May 2000): 45–59.
- 3 Until World War I, Ra'd and Garabed Krikorian worked independently and had their own photography shops. They then joined forces and worked together until approximately 1933 when John Krikorian, Garabed’s son, returned from his studies.
- 4 After King Abdullah was assassinated and Hussein was crowned king of Jordan in 1952, he rarely worked with the monarchy.
- 5 Zaki Za'rur says that his father photographed tourists in the church and worked in the studio between the years 1956 and 1972.
- 6 Steinitz, “Region of Distance.”
- 7 See Sela, *Photography in Palestine, Made Public*, and “Genealogy of Colonial Plunder.”
- 8 See online at www.archives.mod.gov.il/Eng/Pages/geninformation.aspx (accessed 8 July 2018).
- 9 According to the Israeli “Archives’ Regulations Law 2010”, which expands the “Archives Law 1955,” the period of limitation of security materials is between thirty and seventy years, see online at www.archives.gov.il/wp-content/uploads/201603/1/%D7%AA%D7%A7%D7%A0%D795%D7%AA-%D794%D790%D7%A8%D79%B%D799%D795%D7%A0%D799%D79%D_%D7%A2%D799%D795%D79F_2010.pdf (accessed 8 July 2018). According to the IDFA’s “Exposure of Material for the Public Examination,” “Files and documents can be declassified, by regular procedure, after fifty years. The declassification of later files is possible under the authorization of a special committee” see online at www.archives.mod.gov.il/Eng/Pages/geninformation.aspx (accessed 9 July 2018). However, from my experience, the special committee gives permission only to researchers who tell the official Israeli narrative. I never received such a permission (which I applied for at various times). In a meeting of the Israeli Parliament’s Constitution, Law and Justice Committee relating to the study of confidential material on 17 January 2005, as the Association for Civil Rights in Israel reports, one of the security officials said: [The criterion to open restricted material is] “to be one of own. I was editor of *Maarachot* [an official Israeli

- military magazine]. Within this framework, I got it. If I hadn't been editor of *Maarachot*, I wouldn't have got it." See online at www.acri.org.il/he/1062 (accessed 9 July 2018). See also Sela, *Made Public*, 31–32, and "Genealogy of Colonial Plunder."
- 10 The photographer spelled his name as "Khalil Rissas" in English, usually transliterated from Arabic as "Khalil Rassas."
 - 11 The chain of events was first described by the author in 2009; see Sela, *Made Public*.
 - 12 Sela, "Genealogy of Colonial Plunder."
 - 13 The albums that were open for view did not contain those photographs still censored for study by the IDFA. These were mainly photographs of Jewish/Israeli dead, which according to Israeli law cannot be examined or exposed.
 - 14 The original negatives have been always in the possession of the photographer and later his family.
 - 15 The numbering on the back of the photographs is identical to the numbering of Za'rur's negatives, and differs from the numbering at the bottom of the photographs given by the IDFA.
 - 16 A number of signatures were discovered in the album: Dov Steiger later known as Dov Sion (Yael Dayan's late husband), a man named Arie (no family name), and also the initials: M.T.
 - 17 Copies of Za'rur's original description (his list only partly survived) and his original numbering, as well as comments by the archivists, soldiers and others, were copied by the author and are in her possession.
 - 18 The Jerusalem Foundation is a private nonprofit foundation, founded in 1966 by Teddy Kollek shortly after his election as mayor of West Jerusalem, to fundraise for development.
 - 19 The film *Jerusalem Cuts* (2008), directed by Liran Atzmor, shows that the album was seized from Za'rur's house by Israeli soldiers in 1967, but this version is refuted by Zaki Za'rur. See Dalia Karpel, "Black, White and Bloody," *Haaretz*, 17 April 2008, online at www.haaretz.com/black-white-and-bloody-1.244145 (accessed 8 July 2018).
 - 20 In April 2018 I submitted a paper to a Swiss foundation to establish a project entitled: "Palestinian Materials, Images and Archives held by Israel," to discuss the possibility of the return of Palestinian materials, images, and archives, visual and others, that were seized or looted by Jewish/Israeli forces/soldiers and individuals since the first decades of the twentieth century and now held by Israel in its official archives.
 - 21 Atzmor, *Jerusalem Cuts*.
 - 22 Benny Morris, *The Road to Jerusalem: Glubb Pasha, Palestine and the Jews* (Israel: Am Oved, 2006) [in Hebrew], 159–177.
 - 23 John Phillips, *A Will to Survive – Israel: The Face of Terror 1948, The Face of Hope Today* (New York: Dial Press/James Wade, 1977), 8.
 - 24 Phillips, *A Will to Survive*, 2.
 - 25 Apparently, Phillips and Za'rur knew one another. Za'rur has a photograph of Phillips.
 - 26 In conversations and correspondence in January–February 2008, the Foundation's staff claimed they had no information about the history of Za'rur's album, including how it came into their possession, why they decided to hand it over to the IDFA shortly after the Phillips exhibition, and why they did not show Za'rur's photographs from the album alongside Phillips's work. See also Sela, *Made Public*.