

ARCHIVING PALESTINIAN ORAL HISTORY: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

This policy brief addresses how the Palestinian Oral History Archive (POHA) can inform, produce and support crucial policy research and recommendations for Palestinian refugees regarding social, legal, economic, and human rights issues.

The POHA project, housed at the American University of Beirut (AUB) Libraries in partnership with the Issam Fares Institute, is an audio-visual archival collection of oral history testimonies by first generation Palestinian refugees living in camps around Lebanon. The Archive holds over 1,000 hours of interviews collected in the 1990s by Al-Jana (The Arab Resource Centre for Popular Arts) and the Nakba Archive, in an effort to preserve the experience of the 1948 Nakba and its effects on the Palestinian population. The interviews are wide-ranging, covering issues such as daily life in pre-1948 Palestine, as well as current-day conditions in Lebanese refugee camps. POHA's aim is to preserve and catalogue these testimonies, and to make them available to policy-makers, researchers and activists interested in a variety of issues including: the modern history of Palestine; refugee studies; human rights; healthcare and wellbeing; gender studies; urban studies; Right of Return; memory and identity; social history; and comparative analyses between pre- and post-Nakba conditions.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ It is necessary to recognize and use oral history as a legitimate methodology to inform the gap in both scholarly and policy-based research on Palestinian history, and to enrich existing top-bottom policy and research methodologies
- ▶ Oral history testimonies can inform more rigorous and comprehensive grassroots analyses regarding living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon
- ▶ Oral testimonies should be used to shed light on human rights abuses, such as lack of access to basic resources, lack of access to education, and the discriminative legal status of Palestinian refugees
- ▶ Oral testimonies can help policy-makers conduct comparative analyses of Palestinian and Israeli demographics over time; analyze how race, ethnicity, and religion inform the Zionist movement; and examine and contextualize ethnic, racial, and religious power dynamics
- ▶ Oral testimonies can inform not only village histories, but also can inform mapping the right of return

Background

The Nakba of 1948 refers to the Zionist invasion and colonization of Palestine and the subsequent establishment of the state of Israel. Approximately 750,000 Palestinians were expelled and 418 villages were destroyed or depopulated, leaving 86% of the Palestinian population displaced and 77% of Palestinian land occupied (Khalidi, 2005; UNRWA, 2016). East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip were further annexed after the Six Day War of 1967, together constituting the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). Today, the occupation continues to intensify with the growth of illegal settlements, with an estimated 70% increase in settlement construction between April 2016 and March 2017 (Berger, 2017) and approximately 600,000 settlers now living illegally in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (B'Tselem, 2017).

Approximately 450,000 Palestinians are registered refugees in Lebanon, with around 53% living in the twelve established UNRWA camps (UNRWA, 2016). To this day, Palestinians are denied their Right of Return by the Israeli state, despite UN GA Resolution 194 guaranteeing refugees' Right of Return to their homes (UNRWA, 2017), and as 'stateless citizens' are unable to claim the same rights as other foreigners living in Lebanon (ibid)¹.

¹ Today, the OPT consist of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem with Israel politically and/or militarily controlling the vast majority of these areas.

They are barred from working in over 30 professions (UNRWA, 2016) and do not have equal access to education, healthcare, housing, and freedom of movement (UNHCR, 2016). Camps are badly maintained and conditions are poor, with regular problems regarding sewage, garbage, water, infrastructure, electricity, and overcrowding. Moreover, internal conflicts between political factions in the camps frequently lead to major disruptions and destruction that has resulted in further loss of life and homes, and further displacement (ibid).²

The necessity of POHA

Within this precarious political and legal context, there are few organizations and resources that document Palestinian history and refugees' experiences of the Nakba. Most existing research uses top-bottom methods that fail to represent community voices and do not take into account the relevance of socio-cultural history³, particularly memory and identity, in policy-making. Moreover, political stakes often lead international research and scholarship to actively silence Palestinian voices in favor of a Zionist narrative in order to legitimize Israel's Apartheid state (Khalidi, 2005; Hastings, 2016)⁴. On a local level, the Israeli state's control and censorship of Palestinian records, institutions, archives, and cultural resources render them scarce and/or inaccessible (Khalidi, 2010, p.10).

To challenge this, the Palestinian Oral History Archive taps into the significance of qualitative grassroots methods to give a platform for underrepresented and marginalized groups. Its use of oral history is inclusive and accessible as it is able to reach marginalized groups such as illiterate people or those living in peripheral social conditions (Allan, 2005; Masalha, 2009). Furthermore, the interviews are carried out by community members themselves, who are often best positioned to lead this research given their personal experience and knowledge of the Nakba and of exile.

2 One of the most notable examples of this is the Nahr El Bared camp in 2007, where a conflict between Fatah al Islam and the Lebanese Armed Forces destroyed 95% of the camp (see UNHCR, 2016 and Hassan & Hanafi, 2010 for further reading).

3 With a few exceptions, most notable of which is Rosemary Sayigh pioneering work on Palestinian oral history. Please see:

Sayigh, R. (1994). Too many enemies. London: Zed Books.

Sayigh, R. (1979). Palestinians: From peasants to revolutionaries: a people's history. London: Zed Press.

Sayigh, Rosemary. "Gender, Sexuality, and Class in National Narrations: Palestinian Camp Women Tell Their Lives." Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, vol. 19, no. 2, 1998, pp. 166-185. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3347164.

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4 Although certain international human rights organizations and policy-makers recognize, to a limited extent, the violence being inflicted on Palestinians (see Human Rights Watch, 2017; see Amnesty International, 2017), the recent censorship of a UN report on Palestine irrevocably demonstrates the international community's complicity in maintaining the Israeli narrative as the dominant one. The report, written by a Palestinian scholar, described the occupation as Apartheid. Under international political pressure, the report was withdrawn and its author, Rima Khalaf, resigned (Al Jazeera, 2017).

POHA's participatory research action provides a platform which encourages the production of alternative narratives that center Palestinian voices and social history, and reinforces a sense of pride and self-worth within Palestinian communities. The use of these oral histories in policy-making can thus contribute to shaping forward-looking policy recommendations that account for identity and heritage in their work towards justice.

Considering this, there is an urgent need for initiatives such as POHA to: a) give voice to underrepresented people; b) inform and fill the gap in scholarly and mainstream understanding of Palestinian history; c) archive testimonies for the Palestinian community, students, and researchers to access them; and d) make these resources available to policy-makers in order to carry out rigorously informed grassroots analyses around issues of human rights and justice for Palestinian refugees.

Oral history & policy-making

The most notable use of oral history use in public policy is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which was initiated post-Apartheid in 1995. It allowed both victims and perpetrators of violence to voice their experiences in court and come forth in an attempt to advocate transitional justice (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2017). With government support, the commission recorded testimonials and held numerous public hearings. The TRC reports produced were thoroughly inclusive and detailed, demonstrating and thus establishing the significance of oral history and first-hand accounts in policy and conflict resolution. Similarly, POHA's testimonies that document how the Nakba and Palestinian exile have affected Palestinian refugees constitute a crucial resource for support and representation of under-represented groups and narratives, and for the creation of public policy geared towards justice.

Considering this, policy-makers working on the Palestinian conflict can use POHA to gain insight into the most pressing issues of the community and how best to address them. Sample topics of interest include (but are not limited to):

- ▶ **Living conditions in Lebanese refugee camps**
Policy-makers can use the testimonies to develop policy recommendations regarding the living conditions in refugee camps, addressing the needs of refugee communities which include (ibid.):
 - ▶ Equal access to basic needs such as food, shelter, electricity, and water;
 - ▶ Equal access to public resources such as healthcare, education, the workforce, and the market;
 - ▶ Freedom of movement and travel.
- ▶ **Legal status for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon**
POHA's testimonies can serve to help policy-makers develop recommendations or campaigns targeted at Lebanese lawmakers, in order to address the legal framework within which Palestinian refugees are allowed to live and work. Some of these issues include (UNHCR, 2016):
 - ▶ Lack of citizenship rights and unequal right to employment;
 - ▶ Restrictions on residency permits and lack of right to

- own property;
- ▶ Restrictions on movements in and out of camps;
- ▶ Restrictions on travel outside of Lebanon;
- ▶ Increased risk of detention.

“POHA’s testimonies that document how the Nakba and Palestinian exile have affected Palestinian refugees constitute a crucial resource for the creation of public policy geared towards justice and representation.”

▶ **Claim to land and Right of Return**

The mapping of historic Palestine is a fundamental tool for informing Palestinian policy issues, and first-hand accounts have helped recover and document the Palestinian names of the 418 villages destroyed by Zionist forces in 1948 (Salman Abu Sitta, 1999; Palestine Remembered, 2016; B’tselem, 2017; Zochrot, 2014). POHA’s testimonies that discuss historical villages can contribute to a better understanding of Palestinian history through:

- ▶ Conducting comparative analyses of the geographical composition of historic Palestine and present-day Israel and the OPT, taking into account the growing threat of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land;
- ▶ Informing the case for the claim to the land of expelled Palestinian families through examining the historical geographic and demographic composition of Palestine;
- ▶ Informing the case for the Right of Return by mapping the return of those dispossessed of their land.

▶ **Demographic composition of Palestine/Israel**

Policy-makers can use information about the ethnic and religious makeup within pre-Nakba Palestine to:

- ▶ Conduct comparative analyses of Palestinian and Israeli demographics over time;
- ▶ Analyze how race, ethnicity, and religion inform the Zionist movement;
- ▶ Examine and contextualize ethnic, racial, and religious power dynamics.

▶ **Quality of life before and after the Nakba**

Policy-makers can use the testimonials to understand how the Nakba affected social issues and access to resources through conducting comparative analyses about issues such as:

- ▶ Access to basic needs such as food, water, and shelter;
- ▶ Access to rights such as education, healthcare, the market, and the workforce;
- ▶ The changes in family and community structures (gender roles, family dynamics, child-rearing, contribution to community and society);
- ▶ Access to cultural resources such as artefacts, documents, and historical records;
- ▶ Engagement in cultural activities such as embroidery, storytelling, ceremonies and/or rituals, social gatherings, and religious gatherings.

▶ **Gender roles and family structures**

Gender-based policy programs such as women’s rights and gender equality campaigns can use POHA’s interviews to become informed about how the Nakba and exile affected gender roles in society. Examples include:

- ▶ Changes in women’s legal and social status;
- ▶ Children’s access to education;
- ▶ Shifts in marriage rates and birthrates;
- ▶ Women’s participation in the workforce;
- ▶ Rates of gender-based violence and harassment.

▶ **National belonging and identity**

The Israeli occupation is highly disruptive to the Palestinian social fabric, rupturing the ties between Palestinians and their historical land. POHA’s testimonies can be used to:

- ▶ Challenge the Zionist historical narrative using the records of Palestinian life pre-1948 to establish a sense of Palestinian lifestyle, culture, social norms and community;
- ▶ Document culture as a testimony of historic Palestine in order to contribute to the making of a Palestinian national narrative and history;
- ▶ Reinforce a sense of identity, community, and belonging amongst Palestinian communities who have been displaced and are living in marginalized conditions.

Conclusion

POHA’s collection of testimonies constitute a rich archive that holds invaluable information about the social, legal, and economic issues that Palestinian refugees face. This information is crucial in producing targeted policies and serves as a call to action regarding issues of human rights and justice for Palestinian refugee communities. This policy brief thus strongly recommends the implementation of grassroots methods such as oral history in research and policy-making, with the aim of supporting better informed and sustainable policy recommendations, and to encourage a framework of participatory research action.

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The Palestinian Oral History Archive

The Palestinian Oral History Archive is an archival collection that contains more than 1,000 hours of testimonies with first generation Palestinians and other Palestinian communities in Lebanon. The project will digitize, index, catalog, preserve, and provide access to the material through the creation of a state-of-the-art digital platform. It aims to expand and include additional oral history collections documenting varied aspects of the Palestinian experience in Lebanon and the region. The project is being completed in partnership with the AUB Libraries, the Nakba Archive and the Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts (AL-JANA).

AUB POLICY INSTITUTE

The AUB Policy Institute (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy-relevant research in the Arab region.

We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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