

## **‘Keys to paradise’: Libraries, Literature, and Literacy in Palestine**

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In February 2008, Palestinian militants from the Army of Islam (Jaysh al-Islam fi Bayt al-Maqdis) bombed the library at the YMCA in Gaza City, destroying thousands of books.

Although the YMCA in Gaza is a cultural centre for both Muslims and Christians, the motive may have been sectarian; some reports also cited the reprinting, in Denmark, of controversial cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Muhammad originally published in 2005 (‘ Hamas Arrests’).

The act was self-evidently reprehensible, not least because it artificially divides Islam and book culture, as well as Muslims and Christians, in the Palestinian territories.

Libraries have been built in Palestine, by the different peoples who have inhabited it, since Late Antiquity (Jubeh; Masalha 101, 115). Following the Arab Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 640, al-Aqsa mosque complex in Jerusalem became a significant site of learning, with book cabinets containing theological manuscripts and written copies of the Qur’an. When the city was sacked by Crusaders in 1099, this library was destroyed (Jubeh).<sup>1</sup> A cycle of library building, destruction, and reconstruction continues to this day.

In order to demonstrate that library history cannot be reduced to a ‘civilisational’ struggle between religious groups, or between faith and secularism, this article focuses first on the Nahda (cultural renaissance), a modernising movement that influenced Arab elites in Egypt, then Ottoman Greater Syria (of which Palestine was a part) in the second half of the

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Madonna Kalousian for translating Nazmi Jubeh’s lecture.

nineteenth century. The Nahda ‘sought to reinterpret Arab and Islamic heritage, opening itself up to European intellectual influences’ (Wallach 43-44). This syncretic view of cultural heritage has deeper roots: as far back as the third century, the Byzantine Library of Caesarea-Palaestina (Qaysariyah) signalled ‘cosmopolitan charisma and intellectual vigour’, aligning the city with other Mediterranean cosmopolises such as Alexandria (Masalha 102, 101).

Regional embeddedness and the coexistence of multiple faith groups have been constant features of Palestinian identity. Refuting constructions of a ‘sectarian Middle East’, Ussama Makdisi shows that ‘modern political solidarities’ emerged in the Mashriq (Arab east, including Greater Syria) from the late 1860s, cohering across religious and ethnic differences and despite a destabilising shift from Ottoman dominion to European colonial rule (6-7). He uses an ‘ecumenical frame’ to denote cross-faith aspirations scaffolded from ‘eclectic Ottoman, European, and Arab materials’ (7). The subordination of ‘religious differentiation’ to ‘national culture’ remains a lynchpin of Palestinian aspirations toward self-determination, including in post-Oslo arguments for a single-state solution (7; see, notably, Said *Question*). Cosmopolitanism, here, should be understood as the rooting of national legitimacy in diversity, as Palestine’s celebrated writers Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish, and Edward Said – and countless others – repeatedly aver.

The countervailing historical tendency is a colonial continuum that started with the British occupation of Palestine, and the issuing of the Balfour Declaration, in 1917, the latter ‘view[ing] with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people’ (Thompson 72). A neo-colonial situation was inaugurated in 1948 with the unilateral declaration of an independent State of Israel and exile of some 800,000 Arabs (the Nakba or

catastrophe). It persists in Israel's continued occupation and settlement of Palestinian land, control of its borders, and frequent wars on Gaza.

This article explores Palestinian libraries and wider book culture in relation to aspirations of modern cosmopolitan nationalism and in the contexts of occupation and resistance. It tracks Palestinians in libraries and other venues of textual engagement from the early twentieth century to the present. I draw on Palestinian memoirs and fiction available in English, as well as on history and reportage by Palestinians and others. These sources are mutually consolidating in their insistence on the vivacity of Palestinian book culture. They contribute to ongoing efforts to retrieve a continually besieged Palestinian heritage (see De Cesari).<sup>2</sup> It is notable that cousins Walid and Rashid Khalidi, custodians of the Khalidi Library (Khalidiyya) discussed below, are leading historians of Palestine. I amplify this relationship between libraries, books, and heritage by exploring how libraries feature in literary as well as historical writing.

I begin with an emblematic library scene from Isabella Hammad's *The Parisian* (2019) in which Palestinian Arab subjective crisis is spurred by exposure to European epistemology at the height of its imperial domination. I then explore, in counterpoint (see Said *Culture* 61–2), a parallel reality in Palestine where libraries were simultaneously moulding modernity, as we see with reference to the Khalidiyya in Jerusalem. Reference to Ibrahim Nasrallah's novel *Time of White Horses* (*Zaman al-khuyul al-bayda'*, 2007) and three memoirs, Jabra Ibrahim

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Marcello Di Cintio for sharing his interviews with the Khalidiyya librarians, and Sarah Irving and Nora Parr for more references to libraries in Palestinian literature than could be included.

Jabra's *The First Well* (*al-Bi'r al-ula*, 1987), Fadwa Tuqan's *A Mountainous Journey* (*Rihla Jabaliyya, Rihla Sa'ba*, 1985), and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002), diversifies perspectives on Palestinian libraries, literacy, and literature in the pre-1948 period. We end by revisiting private libraries following 1948.

The history of libraries regionally embeds Palestine/Israel whilst illuminating national specificities. Creative literature sheds light on who has (had) access to libraries in Palestine/Israel and the worldly axes on which Palestinian book culture has been conceived. Attention to book infrastructure, as well as representational content, consolidates a 'rhetorics of belonging' (Bernard), contextualising why and how 'Palestine writes'.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Palestinian in Europe: 'Al-Barisi' in the Montpellier University Library**

Hammad's début novel, *The Parisian or Al-Barisi* (2019), illustrates the competing power-knowledge formations that shaped late Ottoman and Mandate-era Palestine. Its first part tracks Midhat Kamal's travails in Montpellier, France, in the early stages of world war one. Midhat, modelled on the author's great-grandfather, is scion of a middle-class merchant family from Nablus (now in the West Bank). We first encounter him on board ship, having graduated from a *lycée* in 'Constantinople'. His use of that name (for Istanbul) gestures toward European influence across the Ottoman region, particularly through Christian missions (Hammad 5, Ayalon 2). At Midhat's college, '[t]he textbooks were all French imports, as were half the teachers, and even most of the furniture [...] only when the bell rang did [students] slip into Turkish and Arabic and Armenian in the corridor' (Hammad 5). In his

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.palestinewrites.org> (accessed 23 March 2021).

final year, however, ‘divisions between the Turkish boys and the rest of them had opened up like a chasm in the earth’, as a result of growing nationalist resistance to the Ottoman regime (36). The novel portrays the eventual British betrayal of the Arab Revolt (1916–18) and the emergence of a Palestinian Arab identity, consolidated through resistance to the British Mandate (from 1919) and to Jewish immigration in the 1920s and 1930s.

During his studies in France, Midhat visits the Montpellier University Library where he encounters ‘Europe’ as ‘the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories’ (Chakrabarty 1):

La France Intellectuelle, with her granite monuments engraved with birth dates and death dates and graduation dates, was a place of such unnerving certainty that Midhat felt he was often gazing up at her plinths in awe. Even in wartime the French argued from their lecterns, formulated between four walls; while in Nablus – in Nablus they reached for the supernatural when they were helpless, whether with prayers to God or the charms of a sheikh to protect them from the evil eye. (Hammad 108)

The scene involves imaginary formations that pivot around ‘a certain version of “Europe”, reified in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern’ rooted in a monumental past (Chakrabarty 2). Midhat, an ‘awed’ interloper, sees the library as telos of rationalism and progress, revealing the stagnancy of his provincial city in Palestine. Nablus, enmeshed in cyclical, supernatural and mythical time, is a site suitable neither for Bildungsroman-like growth (hence his departure), nor for enlightenment:

Nabulsis spent their lives close to their graves, at nature's mercy, and sought antidotes to the world's pain in the vapours of ritual. Here in Europe the trains always ran on time, the streets were paved perpendicular, one did not feel the earth (Hammad 108)

Ironically, given the purported archaic time of his homeland, Midhat carries a pocket watch from his father, custodian of the community values from which his son experiences a temporary reprieve; more ironically still, he loses this watch, in a drunken wager, to a friend killed on the battlefields of the First World War. Midhat's love affair with Europe is tarnished before his return to Palestine. There is a dawning awareness in the Montpellier University Library that, as the quotation above continues, 'these [European] structures were also illusory. They gave only the appearance of rightness'. The granite immutability of European superiority appears 'at times and in certain lights' – increasingly, given the ravages of war – as 'a baseless fabric, which could be lifted. And one could reach a hand beneath, and beyond it feel the thin air' (108).

In the Montpellier Library, Midhat starts critically to grasp a subaltern crisis of self-knowledge in the face of European history as 'entelechy [vital principle] of universal reason', whereby only 'Europe', as fundamental category, is graspable via abstraction and 'all other histories are matters of empirical research' (Chakrabarty 3). The veil of illusion of European mastery is also rent by a history of colonial conquest and dehumanisation of the non-European 'other'. Midhat makes a devastating discovery in the study of his French host, with whose daughter he is having a life-changing affair. Dr Molineu, with exquisite Orientalist condescension, has been writing a book that relegates him to the 'time of the other' (see Fabian): a 'large and legible' passage in his manuscript is entitled 'The Effect of a New Language Learned by a Primitive Brain' (Hammad 128). Midhat is trespassing on his host's

property, but Molineu wants to colonise his very subjectivity, and ‘if he was the father’s subject, how could he be the daughter’s husband? One did not study one’s sons-in-law’ (129).

In fact, the relationship with Jeanette Molineu is doomed from the start due to a perceived disparity in cultural capital: ‘Midhat had not read the right books’ (Hammad 87). He will be haunted by texts for the rest of his life; indeed – in a tongue-in-cheek authorial gesture – he ‘think[s] about the way his own charade might be told after he was dead’, when his memories ‘galloped off into the motley thoughts and imaginations of others’ (387). Midhat’s father, having intercepted a letter from Jeanette, puts in motion a plan that will entangle his son in Nabulsi life. He is compelled to recentre his attention on *textiles*, though he seeks solace in (European) books. Management of the Kamal store in the old city market gives him a vantage point from which ‘to map the social fabric of Nablus’, a more embedded form of knowledge (198). However, when, years later, Midhat’s own (modern) clothing store burns down and the letter from Jeanette is belatedly discovered, he has a breakdown and is institutionalised in Jerusalem. There he befriends Père Antoine, a Catholic priest and Professor of Oriental Studies who – echoing Dr Molineu’s endeavour – is compiling an ethnography of Nablus.

European letters, whether personal missives or ‘objective’ anthropological studies, repeatedly miss the mark because Midhat is a complexly situated late-Ottoman Arab Palestinian. In its failure to encompass his reality, European writing undermines his psychological stability. Moreover, because he only partly relinquishes the accoutrements of European style, he is assigned by his own community to the margins of resistance to British colonial rule that culminates in the (ultimately repressed) Palestinian Revolt of 1936–39. Midhat ‘the Parisian’ exemplifies Tarek El-Ariss’s analysis of Arab modernity (*hadatha*) as ‘a somatic condition’

generated by irreconcilable ‘accidents and events (*ahdath*) emerging in and between Europe and the Arab world, the literary text and political discourse’ (3). His ‘nervous conditions’ symptomatise the effects of colonial ‘humanism’ on its constitutive others. In Midhat’s militant cousin Jamil’s view,

[t]o be a Parisian in Nablus was to be out of step with the times, locked in an old colonial formula where subjects imitated masters as if in the seams of their old garments they hoped to find some dust of power left trapped. (Hammad 505)

Midhat’s split persona – signalled by the Arabisation of ‘Parisian’, *al-Barisi* – is a carapace over a fissure wrought by European epistemological violence in its attempts to ‘humanise’ him (132).

Hammad’s acknowledged sources are mostly Palestinian scholars and the novel contains a striking amount of unglossed Palestinian Arabic. Midhat’s impressions of the Montpellier Library are thereby resituated in Palestine through the processes of historical fictionalisation. We can amplify this contrapuntal gesture with reference to an emergent book culture in Palestine during the same period as Midhat’s European interlude.

### **Reworlding Palestine: the Khalidi Library**

In the translated 1917–49 diaries of Jerusalemite musician Wasif Jawhariyyeh (1897–1972) is a eulogy, written in the immediate aftermath of world war one, for Muhammad Yusuf of the ‘venerable’ al-Khalidi family, to whom ‘[t]here is no greater testimony [...] than the al-Khalidi Library in Jerusalem, which houses a large collection of the finest rare and valuable



books and manuscripts'. The Khalidiyya is, to this day, located 'in the al-Silsilah neighborhood inside the wall [of the Old City], on the main road leading to al-Haram al-Sharif' (Jawhariyyeh 154).<sup>4</sup>

Rashid Khalidi opens *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* (2020) in this library, 'one of the most extensive [collections] in all of Palestine that is still in the hands of its original owners' – a point to which we will return (1). Khalidi reflects that family involvement in the last hundred years (and more) of Palestinian events productively limns historiography (1, 14–15). The Khalidiyya is part of the material fabric of Palestinian urban history. In 1885, the Khalidis, resident in Jerusalem since at least the eleventh century ('A Family's History'), decided to establish a library for their books. Rashid Khalidi's grandfather, Hajj Raghīb al-Khalidi, used a maternal request to renovate a thirteenth-century property, originally purchased by the family in the 1700s to use as a mosque. It is the oldest privately owned property in Jerusalem (1, 257; Di Cintio, *Pay* 104–05; Di Cintio, *Personal*; Jubeh).

A significant part of the collection comprises books that belonged to Yusuf Diya al-Din Pasha al-Khalidi, who in the 1860s left Palestine to attend Christian mission schools, including – anticipating Midhat's journey – in Istanbul (Di Cintio, *Pay* 105). Yusuf Diya read international newspapers and corresponded with scholars, including Theodor Herzl, founder of modern Zionism (Khalidi, *Hundred* 2–3). He epitomised ways in which a cosmopolitan Arab avant-garde started to 'connect different coasts and cities, languages and cultures' (El-Ariss 85).

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<sup>4</sup> See <<https://www.khalidilibrary.org/en>> (accessed 23 March 2021).

Libraries had been ‘an integral part of the history of Jerusalem’ since the Byzantine period (Jubeh). What distinguishes the Khalidiyya, with a handful of other family libraries established at the turn of the twentieth century, is the forging of a synthesis between Islamic epistemology and secular modernity. It is apt that it was founded in a building that was first a Mamluk princely mausoleum (for three men who fought the Crusaders in the thirteenth century [Jubeh]), then a mosque, given that Nahda intellectuals aimed to repurpose monuments. They did so, Yair Wallach argues, through a realignment of Jerusalem’s material and textual economies. Whereas Arabic and Hebrew had been ‘invested with divine meaning’ and ‘strongly embedded within material culture’ – featuring, for example, on lintel stones and embroidered banners – with modernity, text was ‘cast as abstract and fragmented signifier’ that organised the city in novel ways (5). New civic spaces denoted the worldly orientation of an urban middle class (14–15). The Khalidiyya inauguration photograph of 1900 provides a condensed example (4). Mamluk lettering, in stone, is upstaged by a large sign suspended above the library door, that quotes the Qur’an, then gives the Arabic name al-Maktaba al-Khalidiyya, then – in larger script – the French translation Bibliothèque Haldieh (45–46).

Islamic faith and book collecting were entirely compatible. Generations of Khalidis had been Islamic scholars, teachers, and legal functionaries (Jubeh; Di Cintio, Personal). Muhammad ‘Ali al-Khalidi was head of Jerusalem’s *sharia* court (Khalidi, *Hundred* 2). His son Yusuf Diya’s scholarship was also aligned with Islamic principles (2–3). The Library was established as a *waqf* (Islamic public trust) and modelled on the Zahiriyya Library in Damascus, whose founder, *salafi* (Islamic revivalist) Shaykh Tahir al-Jaza’iri, helped to organise its Jerusalem counterpart. Both libraries contain early printed editions of Islamic science and history and copies of religious texts (Khalidi, *Palestinian* 43). The Khalidiyya

holds a dated manuscript in Arabic from 1027–28 and an undated one believed to be a century older (Di Cintio, Personal).

Hajj Raghīb stressed in opening the *Khalidiyya*, almost two decades before Midhat in *The Parisian* confronted ‘La France intellectuelle’, that when ‘civilisation and culture reached the Arabs [with the arrival of Islam,] they founded libraries and schools’ and that Europeans only later realised these prerequisites of progress. The Hajj’s claim publicly displaced Europe (echoing Chakrabarty above) as ‘the origin of Arab cultural, political, and literary modernity’ (El-Ariss 12).

For influential figures such as Hajj Raghīb, libraries were also seen as ‘an important element in their preservation of their country, their culture, and by extension their identity, against the external dangers that threatened them’ (Khalidi, *Palestinian* 46). European powers jostled for power in Jerusalem from the mid-nineteenth century and Jewish immigration increased from the 1890s. In 1917, Britain occupied the city, ending four centuries of Ottoman rule. These harbingers of cataclysmic upheaval began to endow Palestinian reading and writing with distinctly anti-colonial nationalist characteristics.

### **Beyond Jerusalem: Palestinian reading culture before the Nakba**

The early twentieth century saw rapid urban changes in Palestine, marked also by the emergence of a local press. Issa al-Issa, co-founder of the Jerusalem newspaper *Filastin* (Palestine), called for ‘the country’ to have its history recorded, illustrating that Palestinians saw themselves as a people (Khalidi, *Palestinian* 45–46). The forerunners of modernisation, however, constituted a ‘thin social layer’ of educated notable families (Ayalon 2, 6). A wider

social history of engagement with book culture is difficult to delineate due to limited record keeping of library usage even before 1948 (Ayalon 14–15). However, Palestinian literature reconstructs a growing engagement with books amongst the majority rural population, illustrating that between ‘literacy’ and ‘orality’ there are ‘many intermediate levels’ of ‘reading competence’ (18).

Ibrahim Nasrallah’s *Time of White Horses* thematically and stylistically alludes to changing ways of conceptualising Palestinian experience. The novel is set in the decades leading up to the Nakba, mostly in rural Palestine. In one sub-narrative, Mahmud, son of iconic village leader Hajj Khaled, becomes an urbane journalist and translator. In Jaffa, Mahmud begins a relationship with Layla, who he meets when they both try to buy Dante’s *Inferno* translated into Arabic. They later meet at Clock Square, where – again showing a correlation between clock time and modernity – Mahmud is ‘enthralled by Layla’s punctuality’ (523). She is a self-styled ‘new woman’ and a writer who limits herself to stories about Jaffa. In her opinion,

The level of the story depended on how sophisticated its topic was. A readable story was one that could be read by people who knew how to read. She thought: Why should I write about people who don’t know how to read in the first place? And why should I drag readers who have read and learned about everything into stories that are of no concern to them? (535)

Layla’s eschewal of the countryside as a valid site of representation is refuted meta-textually because Nasrallah’s epic novel is embedded in the oral, folk, and mythical archive of rural Palestine. It is also challenged on the narrative level. Mahmud has a wife in the village, Afaf, who has taught herself to read, is privy to Layla’s intimate letters and decides to dissimulate

to her own advantage as a supposed ‘ignoramus with an empty head’ (548). She says nothing explicit about her knowledge of the affair but insists on naming their daughter Layla. ‘Maybe it was just a coincidence’, he frets. ‘After all, since she doesn’t know how to read properly, how could she know?’ (548).

The diversity of ways of knowing notwithstanding, Raghīb al-Khalīdī and urban peers such as Issa bemoaned Palestinian illiteracy (Ayalon 16). The Mandate Census of 1931 estimated an overall literacy rate of 20% which, by 1947, had only risen marginally overall (Ayalon 16–17). This low overall rate was despite an 1869 Ottoman law mandating the establishment of an elementary school in every community and a secondary school in every large town in the empire. By 1914, state schools in Palestine catered to about 10% of the population, in addition to private schools that taught a modern curriculum, foreign mission and local communal schools established in the second half of the nineteenth century, and a network of Qur’anic schools (*katatib* and *madaris*) that had been in place for centuries. Some upper-level primaries (*i’dadi*) opened in district towns, and in Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre, higher-level (*rushdi*) schools were established at the turn of the century (20–21).

Mahmūd, in *Time of White Horses*, is the first boy in the village to go to primary school because his father sees ‘a lack of education among the people’ as a deliberate policy of Ottoman then British overlords (Nasrallah 274–75). A footnote – one of many drawing on Nakba oral testimonies gathered by the author in the 1980s – adds that the founding of a school in Nablus was delayed by the Ottomans who wished ‘to contain [...] nationalist sentiments’; the British, by contrast, wished to ‘win favour with the residents of the city’ (274). When his son graduates, Hajj Khaled accompanies him to Jerusalem in order to find a new school. They are disconcerted by the bustle of what seems ‘another world entirely’ and

opt for a Quaker school in quiet Bethlehem to which Mahmud, a Muslim, is reluctantly admitted (275).

The childhood memoir of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920–1994), *The First Well*, recalls roughly the same period, between his birth in 1920 in Bethlehem and relocation to Jerusalem in 1932. Jabra's memoir corroborates that non-literacy was widespread because only a fragmented education system existed for his generation, particularly those, like him, who grew up in poverty. However, in another example of contextual literacy, young Jabra teaches his godfather, a stonecutter, to 'read' the newspapers 'in his own way, perhaps more by context and reading between the lines than by understanding the meaning of every sentence. The important thing was that he now bought the newspaper' (195).

Through its portrayal of writing and reading practices, *The First Well* maps a multi-denominational Christian Bethlehem. Jabra's first encounter with written Arabic was at a Greek Orthodox primary school, although his family could barely afford the requisite copybook and neither parent could read his rudimentary script (10–12, 14). He then moved to a Syriac Orthodox school where participation in the church choir meant learning to read from an ancient Syriac manuscript 'right side up or upside down equally well' (45). The author notes that Catholic convents established primary schools for girls, 'among the first [...] in the Arab world' (53). He also observes that Christian worship and education became Arabised in a reflection of increasing 'national consciousness' through the 1920s (53).

Jabra emphasises throughout this memoir that books spur individual and collective self-realisation. When he moved to the Bethlehem National School in 1929, he acquired 'two or three Arabic and English books, a copybook for drawing and another for calligraphy, and I

felt they were the keys to paradise' (121–22). Teachers hailed from across the region, renowned educator Khalil al-Sakakini was one of the inspectors, and the school placed 'a love of knowledge and learning [...] in the service of the idea of Arabism, and especially the Arabism of Palestine' (123–24). Jabra recalls this school as 'the beginning of my real exposure to life', aligning its cosmopolitan nationalism with its modernity. It represented an 'opening up to people of all kinds from whom I had been isolated by my family inside a little cocoon on the margins of everything' (125). In 1932, the family moved to Jerusalem and Jabra transferred to Al-Rashidiyya secondary school, headed by Arif al-Budayri.<sup>5</sup> Many of its teachers, including nationalist poet and director of Radio Palestine, Ibrahim Tuqan, 'had just returned from the universities of the world' (213). Ultimately, Jabra would be selected to join their number by Ahmad Samih Khalidi, director of a new Arab College 'open to all the world's ideas blown there on the four winds' (214).

It is instructive, in gender terms, to compare the early experience of Fadwa Tuqan (1917–2003), Ibrahim's younger sister and a major national poet. In her autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey*, Tuqan recalls writing on her exercise book:

Name – Fadwa Tuqan

Class – (I crossed out this word, writing in its place: Teacher – Ibrahim Tuqan)

Subject – Learning Poetry

School – The House (58)

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<sup>5</sup> The Budayri Library in Jerusalem is another important private collection.

Tuqan attended the two primary schools for girls in Nablus where, despite the degraded condition of the buildings, school ‘fulfilled many of the psychological needs that remained unsatisfied at home’ (194–95, 46). In early puberty, however, ‘compulsory confinement’ was imposed – an imperative for upper-class girls that the author links to Ottoman feudal values. Tuqan attempted to transform her seclusion through reading, writing, and reciting poetry but decried life in the ‘bottled-up harem’ with ‘no independent life’ or even ‘a room of my own’, (106). Some of her early writing was wrongly ascribed to Ibrahim and her claim to a personal, rather than nationalist, poetic voice was a source of family conflict: ‘*How and with what right or logic*’, she recalls asking herself, ‘*does Father ask me to compose political poetry, when I am shut up inside these walls?*’ (107, original emphasis). Only in 1948, with the death of her father, did Tuqan ‘escape from the prison of the harem’, an ironic corollary of ‘the roof f[alling] in on Palestine’ (113). Her increasing liberty, encompassing study at Oxford and extensive travel, was enabled because ‘the traditional [gendered] structure of Arab society was shaken, politically, social, and culturally’ by the imperative to ‘struggle against new western imperialism’ (117).

The shadow cast by (neo-)colonialism in the Middle East is long. Jabra, following studies in the UK, returned to teach at his former secondary school in Jerusalem but, following the loss of his family home in 1948, settled in Iraq. In the aftermath of the 2003 allied invasion and ensuing civil breakdown, his house was destroyed by a car bomb. Bashir Abu-Manneh opens *The Palestinian Novel* (2016) by citing the loss of ‘thousands of letters [...], hundreds of books and manuscripts, numerous unpublished works by Jabra himself, and [...] numerous recordings of literary evenings and talks’ (1). It is to the wider depletion of Palestine’s historic book culture that we now (re)turn.



## **‘Farewell, my library! Farewell, the house of wisdom’: A Cultural Nakba**

Jerusalem’s history of conquest and plunder includes the destruction of the first library established by Saint Justinian (built circa 546), during the seventh-century Islamic conquests, as well as of the first libraries of al-Aqsa when Crusaders seized the city in 1099. Salah al-Din established new cultural institutions from 1187 but the most significant revival took place during the Mamluk period (1260–1516) (Jubeh). Historian Nazmi Jubeh observes that public libraries were ‘a common feature of life in the Old City’ in this period; ‘almost every street had at least one library’. From the second half of the seventeenth century, collections were increasingly privatised. *Awqaf* endowments often involved books passed on to sons ‘to guarantee that these collections [stayed] within the same family’. The Khalidi family continued this tradition until a number of them, including Jabra’s teacher Ahmad Samih Khalidi, were forced into exile in 1948 (Jubeh).

The cultural loss that the Nakba entailed is incalculable. Rashid Khalidi emphasises the longevity of the Khalidiyya in a context where ‘[p]rivate Palestinian libraries were systematically looted by specialized teams operating in the wake of advancing Zionist forces as they occupied Arab-inhabited villages and cities’ (*Hundred* 257 4n). Approximately 30,000 Palestinian books, manuscripts and newspapers were appropriated in Jerusalem and more than 70,000 in total during 1948–49 (Amit, ‘Ownerless’ 7). The documentary film *The Great Book Robbery* suggests that the collection of ‘abandoned property’ was a coordinated effort between the National Library at the Hebrew University and armed forces (Brunner; Amit, ‘Ownerless’ 8). Researcher Gish Amit, drawing on declassified documents from 1948, queries the ostensible rationale to conserve the books, given that they were acquired forcibly and (at least to date) in perpetuity (‘Ownerless’ 10–15). He numbers 5,787 books still in the

storage rooms of the National Library with a list of owners that includes major families such as the Sakakinis, Qattans and Nashashibis ('Salvage' 14). Many more books have been absorbed into the library's Oriental collection (Amit, 'Ownerless' 9).

A passage in Khalil al-Sakakini's diary harkens back to the destruction of the Abbasid House of Wisdom in Baghdad in 1258:

Farewell, my library! Farewell, the house of wisdom, the abode of philosophers, a house and witness for literature! How many sleepless nights I spent there, reading and writing, the night is silent and the people asleep ... goodbye, my books! I know not what has become of you after we left: Were you looted? Burnt? Have you been ceremonially transferred to a private or public library? Did you end up on the shelves of grocery stores with your pages used to wrap onions? (239–40)<sup>6</sup>

Access to books such as Sakakini's was not extended to the makers of *The Great Book Robbery*, whose collage form underlines archival uncertainties and dispersed testimonies. Amit argues that

this untold story of the fate of Palestinian 'abandoned' books clearly demonstrates how occupation and colonization [are] not limited to the taking over of physical space. Rather, it achieves its fulfilment by occupying cultural space as well, and by

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<sup>6</sup> The diary has been partly translated into Hebrew; Amit provides the English title ('Salvage').

turning the cultural artefacts of the victims into ownerless objects with no past.

(‘Ownerless’ 8)

Historian Ilan Pappé corroborates a ‘systematic dispossession’ that aimed ‘to defeat the Palestinian narrative’ (qtd. in Brunner). Among the effects of a lost history – indeed, the ongoing destruction of Palestinian tangible and intangible heritage – is the fact that all Palestinian writers draw from a diminished archive.

*The Great Book Robbery* includes a testimony from the British-based author Ghada Karmi, who is shown unable to enter her old home in Qatamon, Jerusalem, where her father had started to compile an English-Arabic dictionary. In her first memoir, *In Search of Fatima* (2002), Karmi explains that her grandfather was ‘primarily concerned with literature, poetry and jurisprudence’ and supported the literary education of his sons; her father ‘was an avid reader and book collector’ (19, 13). The fact that the house contained ‘nothing [...] but books’ – as opposed to hidden arms – protected the family during the Revolt, when British soldiers would regularly force entry (13). It did not, however, protect the Karmis from Jewish militia. A family friend offered to store the books in Jenin in case the library was ‘pillaged’, but Karmi’s father disavowed the gravity of the situation (91–92). The family was forced to flee in April 1948 and Karmi did not see the house again for half a century.

The Khalidi Library was closed between 1950 and 1967, suffering damage to its collection that includes worm holes through a 600-year-old book (Di Cintio, *Pay* 108).<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/cultural-protection-fund/projects/preserving-palestinian-heritage> (accessed 23 March 2021).

of the 1967 war, the bulldozing of the Maghribi quarter north of the library destabilised the library structure and a notice on the door declared it ‘absentee property’. Haifa Khalidi, current co-custodian of the library, recalls her father Heydar ripping this notice to shreds, proclaiming: ‘This library belongs to me, and I am clearly here’ (Di Cintio, *Pay* 107). The IDF occupied the building next door and installed their former Rabbi who, through a sustained campaign of harassment and vandalism, tried to force the family out ‘for security reasons’ (Di Cintio, Personal).

Fortunately, however, the Khalidiyya survived. In the early 1990s, restoration began under the auspices of the Friends of the Khalidi Library (Di Cintio, Personal). Today, it houses manuscripts in one building and more recent publications in another; it has a small cultural centre, visiting researcher apartments, is open to the public, and some of its manuscripts are digitised on a revamped (in 2021) bilingual website. In 2012, the Arabic Manuscripts Digital Library of Jerusalem was inaugurated to promote and make digitally accessible the heritage represented by libraries in the Old City (Eglash). A removal of the Khalidiyya collection to Birzeit University has been mooted, but the family stands firm: ‘If we remove the books from here, it means the building itself is going to be taken’, Haifa said to Marcello Di Cintio, who concludes: ‘The Khalidis first established the library to protect the family’s books. Now, [more than] a century later, the books protect the library’ (*Pay* 110). While the recent appearance of digital Palestinian archives, including The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive and ‘Palestinian Journeys’,<sup>8</sup> is notable, it also remains the case that material books sustain Palestinian life.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Palestinian Journeys’ and the Palestinian Museum digital archive can be both be accessed at: <https://www.palmuseum.org/projects/e-platforms-1>

A century of occupation, censorship, and memocide has included the seizure, targeting, closure and underfunding of libraries in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and 'Israeli Arab' communities. In Palestine/Israel, libraries are political but rarely for reasons fallaciously linked to Islam. Although Islamism emerged in this context in the 1930s, it was not then, or subsequently, the preeminent anti-colonial discourse (Makdisi 177-184). It is British-backed Zionism, which germinated in 'a highly racialised Europe', that has transformed 'the multireligious land of Palestine into a national Jewish state', one tragic effect of which has been 'the end of Jewish life in most of the Arab world' (Makdisi 22). Sectarianism and political Islam are products of colonialism.

An international delegation of librarians and archivists, who visited the region in 2013 in order to inaugurate 'a longer-term process of solidarity work', underlines the importance of 'understand[ing] how Palestine voices reach us and how they are suppressed' (Science for Peace). This article has shown that, despite the foundational rupture of the 'great book robbery' of 1948, which they cite, the history of Palestinian libraries is sustained through practices, in literary writing as in reality, that refuse to concede to attempts to dispossess the Palestinian people.

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