

The World Humanities Report

# Alternative Archival Initiatives as Sites of Resistance

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# Alternative Archival Initiatives as Sites of Resistance

Kristine Khouri Arab Image Foundation

Since about 2001, the Arab world has seen an emergence of alternative archival initiatives and practices that operate between or outside traditional sites of knowledge production in the fields of cinema, art, academia, and civil society. These endeavors are responding to the need to document recent histories while finding solutions to the challenges of historical research, particularly research on the twentieth century, and to the insufficiency of or dissatisfaction with existing official and national narratives. These initiatives, endeavors, and practices produce new narratives and alternative or imaginative histories of the past and present. Responding to and resisting dominant, state-centered histories and discourses, the people behind these projects actively claim agency through these grassroots endeavors.

This archival turn has been turning around the world for several decades, but in the case of the Arab world such work has often developed from a lack of access to material, inconsistency in what is available, and a need to fill in gaps, write in erasures, and voice often intentional silences. All of this must be done while confronting the ruptures and violence in the existing historiography, as well as combating “symbolic annihilation” in archives, a term explored by Michelle Caswell.<sup>1</sup> History- and memory-based projects have been shared and discussed in the context of workshops and symposia, which have offered spaces to think critically and share and develop skills around archival and memory practices. In addition, network- and capacity-building initiatives to train those working with historical materials and develop solidarity and learning between organizations and projects have flourished. The landscape of historical records, particularly of and in the twentieth century in the region, is challenging terrain. Archives have been neglected, destroyed, or displaced as a result of colonial intervention, internal and foreign-led violence and wars, genocide, and governmental action. Nationalist ideologies, as well as extractive, neocolonial, and capitalist practices, have led to the fracture of historically and culturally relevant heritage, records, and collections.

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight against Symbolic Annihilation,” *Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26–37, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26>.

These alternative archival platforms, practices, and initiatives are independent, cross-disciplinary, and creative. They turn away from mainstream archives to other sites of memory and historical records, such as private and personal collections. Through them, new methods and practices have emerged that have the potential to inspire more expansive and inclusive narratives, knowledge, and ways to imagine the world. However, these independent initiatives are fragile and operate in precarious spaces in an unstable region.

## Legacies of Colonialism and Recent Uprisings and Revolutions

Colonial intervention and power have had long-lasting material and immaterial consequences. The organization of colonial records typically mirrors the dynamics of power and follows a Eurocentric archival system. In the postcolonial period, following the end of the Ottoman Empire or the departure of the French or British, colonial or Mandate-related archives were often moved back to the colonizing countries, severing colonized people, the subject of those records, from the documents themselves. Of course, in some cases some records have been returned after negotiation with the home countries. At the same time, those colonial archives may not allow access due to “sensitive” materials, for example, in the case of Algerian records in both France and Algeria.<sup>2</sup> When archival material is displaced from its place of origin, research can be nearly impossible. To conduct basic research, a scholar might travel to Turkey, France, or the United Kingdom to find materials about Palestine, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Syria, or Lebanon. The case of Palestine is further complicated by Israel’s occupation and its seizure and destruction of records. After independent nation-states are established, archives often inherit and follow the logic and traditions left by colonial powers, reinscribing hierarchy, categories of power, and histories imposed from the top down.

Even in the postcolonial period, numerous wars, internal and foreign-led violence, genocide, and destruction have caused tremendous material and immaterial damage to archives, including further displacement, destruction, theft, and intentional strategic movement of archives, libraries, cultural heritage, and personal property. The fifteen-year-long Lebanese Civil War has had long-last-

<sup>2</sup> Constant Méheut, “France Eases Access, a Little, to Its Secrets,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/09/world/europe/france-declassification-algerian-war-archives.html>; Frédéric Bobin, “En Algérie, la révolte des historiens face au verrouillage des archives” [In Algeria, historians revolt against the locking of archives], *Le Monde*, March 29, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/03/29/en-algerie-la-revolte-des-historiens-face-au-verrouillage-des-archives\\_6074879\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/03/29/en-algerie-la-revolte-des-historiens-face-au-verrouillage-des-archives_6074879_3212.html).

ing effects on access to archives to tell the country's history. Access to official (state) archives is difficult, and the official history (and school textbooks) stops at 1975 because more recent history is still contested. Archives in Palestine have been fractured under the Ottoman Empire, British Mandate, and Israeli occupation, which continues today. The Israeli government and military have seized many of the archival materials that remain, making them inaccessible to most Palestinians.<sup>3</sup> The Palestine Liberation Organization's Research Center was one of the first targets of the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982: along with other PLO offices, it was ransacked and looted. The contents of the center—library and archival materials—have since been lost or scattered around the region.<sup>4</sup> A resurgence of interest in recovering lost histories is visible through the proliferation of work in and about Palestine and Lebanon over the past few decades.

The various wars in Iraq and the ongoing US invasion have had severe consequences in the status of official and state archives. They have been at times appropriated by US government, military, and journalists,<sup>5</sup> and the widespread destruction of the country extends to personal collections, archives, artwork, and state institutions or museum records. Of course, other forms of cultural heritage have been destroyed, such as that in the National Museum in Baghdad. The destruction of museums displaying ancient objects and artifacts and historic sites is the most reported and visible to the world, but other forms of cultural heritage and archives have also suffered profound loss.<sup>6</sup> Both modern artwork and modern architecture have been neglected or intentionally destroyed. In Syria and Yemen, the current wars have led to unimaginable loss of human life and destruction of material culture.

Sometimes individuals are responsible for the destruction of their own collections and materials. Dissidents and marginalized communities have intentionally destroyed their own records, publications, and collections out of fear that the government or other forces would use such materials as evidence to identify and punish them. This is even more likely today, since the ubiquity of digital technology and social media makes it easy to “expose” political opinions and indict people. This is not to mention video surveillance or citizen journalism efforts, which may reveal participation at a protest, for example.

<sup>3</sup> See writing by Rona Sela and her 2017 film *Looted and Hidden: Palestinian Archives in Israel*.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed account of the archive's fate, see Hana Sleiman, “The Paper Trail of a Liberation Movement,” *Arab Studies Journal*, no. 24 (Spring 2016).

<sup>5</sup> On the state of archives taken from Iraq, see Wisam H. Alshaibi, “Weaponizing Iraq's Archives,” *Middle East Report*, no. 291 (September 2019), <https://merip.org/2019/09/weaponizing-iraqs-archives/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sa'ad Eskandar, the former director general of the Iraq National Library and Archive, has tirelessly worked to preserve and restore the library.

In addition, a range of other materials have had similar fates—the libraries, collections, and archives of newspapers, museums, religious organizations, and film studios, but also the collections of photographs, family papers, and personal documents found in the homes of every single person. Destruction, displacement, and movement of people to safer places cause things to be left behind. Documents, books, and other materials may be destroyed out of fear of retribution. The reality of the forced and accidental loss of such material is common.

On the other hand, state and national archives use existing records and materials to assert dominant national narratives and their violent, exclusionary agendas. These sites of state power are places where official versions of history are told and evidence to support them is kept. Governments and leaders also shape historical narratives through institutional neglect, which impedes the preservation or gathering of records. Even in those archives, biases influence the choice of what is worthy and what contributes to national narratives, which leads to intentional silencing. Traditionally, these sites do not account for the diversity of lived experiences. I do not mean to dismiss these archives' significance and value but to acknowledge some of the realities and challenges they present. Nor do I mean to place all the blame for the loss of records on those in positions of power; indeed, citizens bear some responsibility, too, for the lack of a widespread, institutional culture of caring for their histories and relevant cultural records.

The “material inaccessibility” of state or colonial archives and libraries is also true for some institutional archives, where documents are either nonexistent

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or difficult or impossible to access.<sup>7</sup> It is common to discover that these records require specific credentials to access, because the powers that be question the research subject or simply because the archive has

closed. Official archives (be they state or national archives, university libraries, or research centers) often have significant barriers to access unless a researcher has the right credentials and permissions or can pay. Writing a “history without documents,” an idea coined by Ibrahim ‘Abduh and cited in Omnia El Shakry’s essay of the same name, frustrates many. In other more productive cases, these

<sup>7</sup> Omnia El Shakry, “History without Documents: The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 920–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/120.3.920>.

difficulties have led to the search for records and material elsewhere and to alternative archival initiatives.

Over a decade after the start of the Arab Spring—a series of revolutions, uprisings, and protests in the Arab world that aimed to unseat oppressive autocratic leaders and overthrow governments—citizens have found it necessary to document movements, events, protests, and social media and other audio-visual productions, as well as the violence inflicted on them. Dozens upon dozens of initiatives to organize grassroots archives have begun to write history anew. These efforts preserve evidence of what happened while serving as a space for artists and scholars to reflect on their practices.<sup>8</sup>

## New Archival Initiatives

The challenge of accessing to records has led many to engage with the subject of historiography. This has brought about a concern with the question of the “archive” or historical records and a historicization of the archival practices in the Arab region. In response, artists with research-based practices, prevalent throughout the region for over three decades, as well as filmmakers, community members, researchers, and scholars, have turned elsewhere for sites that hold memories, histories, and collections of materials that may offer raw material for writing history.

These alternative sites include individual collections, private homes, people (who are asked to share their memories informally or through recorded oral history projects), family photo albums, personal documents, and other traces of the past. Materials that were hidden and forgotten or cherished and cared for are not the only sites; trash bins, sidewalks with discarded stuff—newspapers, journals, film reels, hotel ledgers—and abandoned buildings with neglected offices are also subject to picking and scavenging. Emerging from these collections may be histories of women, marginalized groups, ethnic communities, and economic classes that would not have otherwise found their way into official archives. The potential to resist dominant historical narratives and formulate and imagine new narratives is limitless. Recovering and uplifting people’s previously unrecognized or ignored memories naturally expand what histories can be written, especially of the twentieth century.

Amid the disruption of access to historical records, people have carved out spaces to take on archival work. They work outside of the system, build collec-

<sup>8</sup> Donatella Della Rata, Kay Dickenson, and Sune Haugbolle, eds., *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020).

tions, and produce oral histories from those whose stories haven't been recorded on their own terms. People do this work because they must. Practitioners, artists, researchers, and curators from diverse personal and professional backgrounds reclaim agency in the collection of their documentation and archives as they explore previously ignored or traditionally insignificant sites of memory.

## Cultural History

The visual arts, photography, cinema, music, dress, and textiles of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been the subject of grassroots initiatives to collect, preserve, and activate their histories. Tiraz: Widad Kawar Home for Arab Dress, a center to preserve Palestinian, Jordanian, and other Arab costumes and textiles in Amman, has been dedicated to the work of collecting these items since the late 1960s. The Arab Image Foundation, established in 1997 by filmmakers and artists with an interest in researching the visual history of the Arab world, operates today at the intersection of research, art, and archival practice with a collection of 500,000 photographic objects from the Middle East and diaspora.

As for the plastic and visual arts of the twentieth century, cultural organizations have developed archives and libraries, including at independent cultural spaces such as Darat al Funun in Amman, Sursock Museum's library and archive in Beirut, and the Modern and Contemporary Art Museum, also in Lebanon (Aalita). Initiatives like the Modern Art Iraq Archive and the archival projects of the Atassi Foundation are exploring how digital archives may widen access to stories from places with particularly fractured histories and with archives dispersed in exile.

The work of documenting, recovering, and preserving fleeting architecture has been a focus of a number of initiatives. The Arab Center for Architecture, established in Beirut in 2008, has a mission to preserve architectural history, documentation, and drawings in the Arab world. Numerous other initiatives to research the history of modern architecture throughout the region have also flourished. In Palestine, Al Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation, established in 1991, has aimed to protect and document architectural heritage. By documenting architectural sites before or even as they are destroyed, this work combats physical erasure through documentation.

The Foundation for Arab Music and Archiving & Research, established in Lebanon in 2009, hosts an archive of recordings from the *nahda* period (the period of Arab Enlightenment from second half of the nineteenth through the early twentieth century), while IRAB Association for Arabic Music has been



working since 2003 to support traditional “oriental” music. As for cinema, Nadi Lekol Nas, founded in 1998 in Beirut, started collecting and safeguarding films, music, and literary productions of the Levant in 2005. Militant film practices have been the focus of the cinema research and production collective Subversive Film, who are doing the work of gathering, restoring, and digitizing found films made by international, Arab, and Palestinian filmmakers about the Palestinian struggle.<sup>9</sup>

## Artistic Practice and Film

In the fields of exhibition making, contemporary art, and film, an emphasis in research-based practice has been a mainstay since the early 1990s. Researching, recovering, and narrating these histories have been central themes in artistic and filmmaking practices. These works have played a particular role in discussions on historiography and those who narrate history regionally and internationally. At times, these works have shifted the discussion on the subject, excavation, and presentation of historical memory and events to be more expansive, creative, and speculative. Fiction and more imaginative renderings of the past have also pushed the practices in academic scholarship and the institutions of official libraries and archives to think beyond notions of “truth.”<sup>10</sup> Listing the incredible artists and filmmakers and their work would require its own essay, so I refrain from mapping them here.

## Justice and Accountability

With histories that are contested across the region, small projects and larger independent initiatives to document and gather traces of these or denied or unresolved histories have played a role in building a more complete collective memory and calling for justice. They also offer spaces to contest official actions and hold authority figures accountable. The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, founded in 1982 by civil activist Wadad Halawni in response to the growing number of missing people, including her husband, Adnan Musbah Halawani, who was abducted from their home that year, has been actively collecting press clippings, photographs, and other materials to document the more than seventeen thousand unrecognized miss-

<sup>9</sup> See Resounding Archives Podcast series, <https://kiosk.art/resounding-archives>.

<sup>10</sup> Chad Elias, Hannah Feldman, and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, among others, have written extensively about artists and filmmakers with archival practices at the core of their work.

ing people from the Lebanese Civil War, while actively working to change laws and policy in Lebanon to recognize this history. The 1000 Autres Project documents individuals who went missing during the Algerian war of independence. UMAM Documentation and Research, founded in 2005 in Beirut by Lokman Slim and Monika Borgmann, has played a role in gathering materials related to the political, social, and cultural history of the country and its neighbors. Their archive's collection ranges from periodicals, posters, and film to personal documents. They have been actively preserving these materials and making them available, while programming and collaborating with others to reveal histories of the country.

## Oral Histories

Collecting and sharing oral histories have allowed for a range of voices to be heard that otherwise would have remained silent. In the case of Palestinian history, two independent grassroots oral history projects from the Al-JANA Association and the Nakba Archive project serve as the basis of the Palestinian Oral History Archive at the American University of Beirut.<sup>11</sup> The interviews in the collection contain around one thousand hours of testimonies with first-generation Palestinians and other Palestinian communities in Lebanon, focusing on personal accounts of the Nakba and narratives of life in the camps. This is a rare instance of collaboration between a university and an independent archival initiative.

Women's history has also been a major topic of interest for scholars, activists, and other community members, particularly women's oral history. Knowledge Workshop in Lebanon organizes and trains community members around issues of gender and feminism and gathers documentation of feminist history.<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1995 in Egypt, the Women and Memory Forum also documents these histories, produces knowledge, and educates on the subject of feminist history, as well as engaging the community.<sup>13</sup>

Oral histories are the central methodology the site-specific public history project *Ihky ya Tarikh* (Tell, history), led by cultural historian Alia Mossallam.<sup>14</sup> Her methodology uses oral history and song recording to write community histories around water, the Nile, and Nubian communities.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://al-jana.org/>, <https://www.nakba-archive.org/>, and <https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.alwarsha.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://wmf.org.eg/en/>.

<sup>14</sup> Alia Mossallam, "History Workshops in Egypt: An Experiment in History Telling," *History Workshop Journal* 83, no. 1 (2017): 241–51.

## Digital Archives

Technology has enabled many of these projects; the ubiquity of audio- and video-recording devices, the affordability of scanners and cameras, and the development of digital archives and digital interfaces have democratized the collection and digitization of material. A number of projects have used these technologies to digitize archives from personal collections and allow the physical object to remain in the hands of the owners. Two organizations in Palestine stand out in this regard. Khazaaen, a volunteer-based group established in 2016 in Jerusalem, is an initiative to digitize a range of material and collaborate with individuals and organizations. The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive Project, a multiyear project of the Palestinian Museum, actively looks not only within historic Palestine for material but also to the diaspora to build its digital collections, allowing for diasporic and exiled communities to contribute to and access their histories.

## Community-Led Documentation of Revolutions

The uprisings, revolutions, and protests since 2011 have led to dozens upon dozens of initiatives to document and archive events. In the case of the protests and ongoing war in Syria, Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution is a trilingual digital database with the mission to “document and archive all forms of free, artistic and cultural expression in the times of revolution and war” to “build an archive of national intangible heritage.”<sup>15</sup> Dawlaty, a nonprofit foundation that came out of the revolution and was registered in 2013, focuses on civil society development and has been developing an oral history project.

The Egyptian revolution led to many initiatives to document and archive the revolution, plus creative productions. Some initiatives worth noting include: the 858 film archive, organized by filmmaking collective Mosireen; projects like R-Shief and Tahrir Documents, which archive and map the 2011 uprisings in Egypt; and Tahrir Archives, led by artist Lara Baladi. In Tunisia, exhibitions of archives like *Before the 14th, Instant Tunisien—Archives de la Révolution* (Bardo National Museum, Tunis, 2019) used citizen-gathered digital archives of the revolution.

While the recent revolutions and uprisings and projects are most visible, the DREAM project (Drafting and Enacting the Revolutions in the Arab Mediterranean) brings together people and organizations to critically interrogate and historicize the history of revolutions in the Mediterranean region.

<sup>15</sup> Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, “About Us,” <https://creativememory.org/en/about-us/>.

## Discursive Encounters

An increase in workshops, symposia, and conferences around the subject of the archive in the Arab region since around 2012 has brought together interdisciplinary groups of people. The 2009 “Speak, Memory” conference at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, for example, gathered over a dozen regional and international organizations and projects around the issue of art and archives. Some academic-oriented projects have expanded their spaces to include artists and practitioners to support a more interdisciplinary discussion around engaging with archives. At the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin, Europe in the Middle East—The Middle East in Europe (EUME) is a multidisciplinary research program that has played a central role in convening people across disciplines and fields, including artists, scholars, and activists, around the question of archives. Some examples include the 2018 workshop in Berlin “Out of the Archives New Archival Practices: Towards Alternative Historiographies, Voices, and Spaces” and the 2019 workshop in Beirut “Fragment—Power—Public: Narrative, Authority, and Circulation in Archival Work.” The Arab Council for the Social Science’s Critiques of Power working group organized the “Forum on Alternative Practices” Practices in Beirut in December 2018, which bridged many of these discussions by inviting participants to think critically about power and engagement with archives.

These events returned to contemporary art spaces when the Haus der Kulturen der Welt hosted a two-day conference in Berlin in 2018. Titled “Revisiting Archive in the Aftermath of Revolution,” the forum of lectures, presentations, discussions, readings, performances, and film screenings looked at current practices by filmmakers, artists, scholars, and organizers and explored historically focused projects and noted that “the relationship between archiving and political events is multi-faceted, as the future seems contingent on archiving the present and revisiting the past.”<sup>16</sup>

## Networks and Capacity Building

From 2009 to 2016, several efforts emerged to build networks and gather independent archives and more traditional institutional archives, such as newspaper archives, university and state archives and libraries, and academic research centers. These initiatives created spaces to develop a regional dialogue around challenges of the work of managing and preserving archival material.

<sup>16</sup> The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, “Revisiting Archive in the Aftermath of Revolution,” <https://www.arabculturefund.org/Projects/6577>.

The Modern Heritage Observatory was established in 2012 with the goal “to advocate for the preservation of modern cultural heritage—with an emphasis on photography, music, architecture, video and film—in the Middle East and North Africa.”<sup>17</sup> It has done so by hosting regional symposia and events, building a directory, and publishing the *Modern Heritage Observer*,<sup>18</sup> which highlights the various organizations and conversations around modern heritage, along with the practices and challenges of preservation.

Regarding photographic history, the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative is a multiyear program established in 2009 focused on gathering experts and primarily official or institutional archives for workshops, meetings, and conferences to support professional development and training around preservation and research capacity building.<sup>19</sup> It was led jointly by the Arab Image Foundation, the Art Conservation Department at the University of Delaware, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Getty Conservation Institute.

## Conclusion

These independent initiatives are both driven and fragile. They occupy precarious spaces in a continuously challenging and unstable region. Violence has not yet subsided in many of the cities where these people and groups work, and this instability is compounded by government negligence (like the August 4, 2020, Beirut port explosion) and lack of public resources to support the preservation of culture and heritage. Thus, networks, support, and solidarity are necessary to ensure that these projects continue to survive and that others emerge. Those working with and on these alternative archival initiatives—librarians, archivists, activists, academics, artists, filmmakers, community members, researchers, and technologists—have imagined new ways to think and work through critical and ethical practices around memory, history, and knowledge production, as they gather, caretake, and steward collections of historically relevant material and produce knowledge and critical spaces. As sites of research and knowledge production themselves, many of these projects create space for a more radical and liberatory work. They seek to write their own histories and to facilitate the writing of history and stories outside of the traditional boundaries and knowl-

<sup>17</sup> Clémence Cottard, Charbel Saad, and Rachel Tabet, “The Arab Image Foundation: Digitizing the Middle East’s Photographic Heritage,” *Iris* (blog), J. Paul Getty Trust, May 1, 2017, <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/the-arab-image-foundation-digitizing-the-middle-east-photographic-heritage/>.

<sup>18</sup> See [https://issuu.com/modernheritageobservatory/docs/moho\\_publication\\_en-digital-per\\_pag](https://issuu.com/modernheritageobservatory/docs/moho_publication_en-digital-per_pag).

<sup>19</sup> See <http://meppi.me>.

edge silos, in the hope that their work will lead to a more hopeful, inclusive, and self-determined future for people living in the Arab world.

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