



The Upside-Down Archives World

Between Celebration and Destruction in Middle East Librarianship

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“Why fire?”

Because fire leaves nothing but ash, and ash cannot testify.

Fire is the perfect accomplice of erasure”

–Algerian writer Waciny Laredj.



The Law That Cannot Act

International law recognizes the deliberate targeting of archives and cultural heritage during armed conflict as a serious violation, often constituting a war crime. Several key legal frameworks establish the protection of cultural property:

- **Before 1954:** Cultural destruction was condemned but not fully criminalized.
- **1954 – Hague Convention:** First major international treaty protecting cultural heritage.
- **1998 – Rome Statute:** Recognized destruction of heritage as a **war crime under ICC jurisdiction.**
- **2016 – Al-Mahdi Case:** First-ever ICC conviction for attacking cultural heritage.
- **Present Day: UNESCO and the ICC actively monitor and prosecute cultural destruction.**



الغزاة نهبوا مركز الأبحاث الفلسطينية والموظفون يستعدون لاستئناف العمل



(محمود الجواد)

استبدلت بكتابات عمرية ملأت جدران المركز ولا تخلو من شتائم

الميكرو فيلم ، الذي نقل الى مركز للتوثيق تابع للمركز يقع في منطقة الطريق الجديدة ، صودر من قبل عناصر من الجيش اللبناني كما انه مسؤولون في المركز ، والمحاولات جارية لاسترداده

الكتب اختلقت من الرفوف
بأثر موظفو مركز الأبحاث الفلسطينية ، أمس - حصر الأضرار والخسائر الناتجة عن أعمال سرقة وتخريب قام بها جنود اسراييليون حين اقتحمت قوات الغزو المركز ، في عداد المؤسسات التي شعلتها اجراءات اجتياح العاصمة
السرقة طالت معظم محتويات المركز من كتب علمية قيمة ومستندات



على فاصح إلتصقات جنيف الخاصة بطوائف الحرب التي طغت جملة الإسكان التابعة الأبحاث الفلسطينية في ظل الاحتلال



Lebanese National Library





Mutanabbi street explosion (Book Market)



Timbuktu Manuscripts



Timbuktu Manuscripts



National Library of Iraq



National Library of Iraq

Timbuktu Manuscripts

Library director Boris Cholaria in front of the burned books.



Ermolay Adzhindzhal and Abesalom Lepsaya in front of the archives turned to ashes. Photo by Viacheslav Chirikba



The National Library in Sarajevo

India: Local imam Mohammad Shahabuddin holds a copy of a half-burnt Quran [Meer Faisal/Al Jazeera]



Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/10/india-town-mourns-burning-of-historic-library-at-muslim-school>

India: The inside view of the library at Madrasa Azizia in Bihar Sharif that was set ablaze by a mob on March 31 [Meer Faisal/Al Jazeera]



Ukraine: The destroyed library in Chernihiv. Photo – UNIAN.



Source: <https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/news/in-ukraine-the-russians-destroyed-about-100-libraries/>

Archival Violence





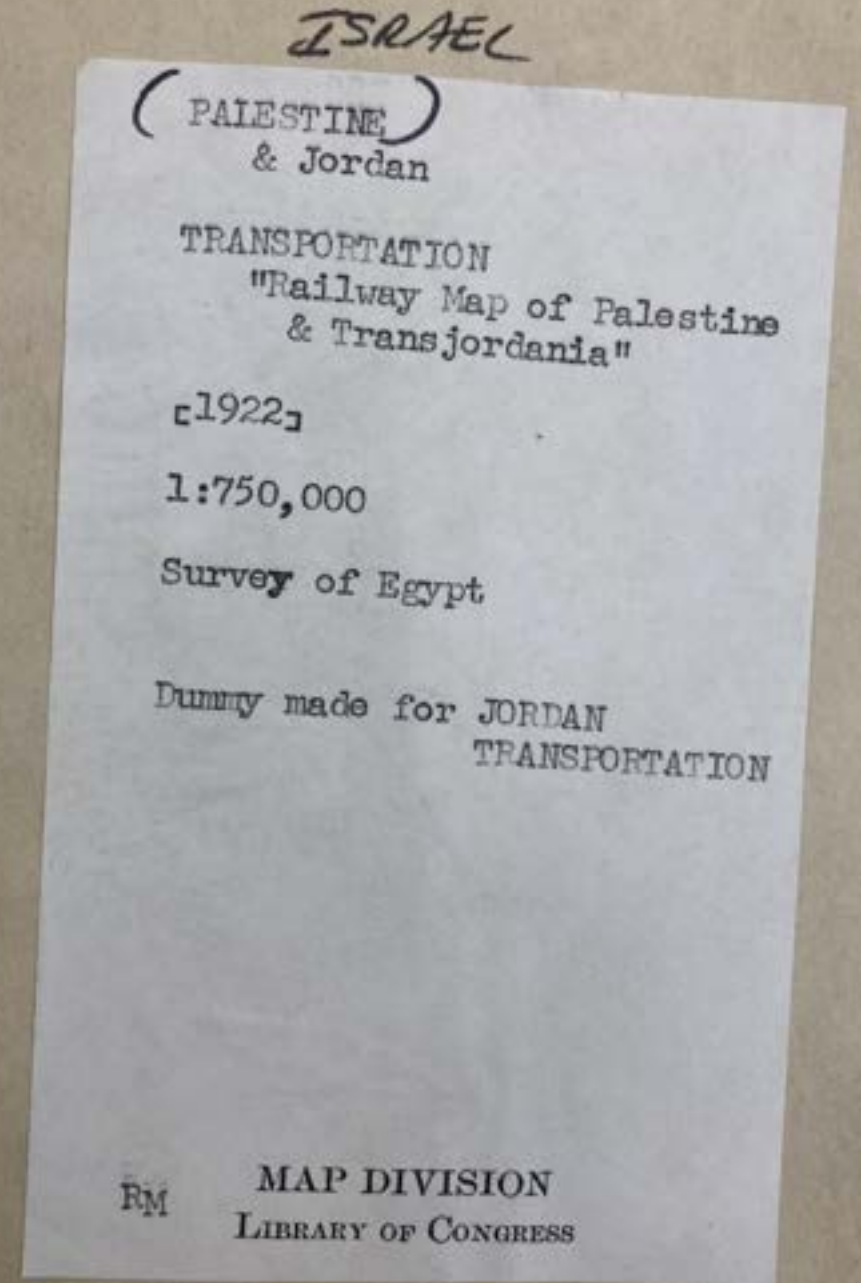
SUBJECT HEADING

When the Mask Fell

- Cataloging systems frequently erase or distort Palestinians' narratives by omitting terms related to occupation, resistance, and violations of international law.

Cataloging as a Tool of Erasure

- Invasion vs. Intervention
- Settler Colonialism vs. City Planning
- Occupation vs. Conflict
- Palestinians vs. Palestinian Arabs



Crimes Against Memory



Zeev Erlich, in military uniform, while present in southern Lebanon with the Israeli army.



- Israeli father reads a book named “Alon and Lebanon” to his son, where the characters say that Lebanon “belongs to Israel”
- According to Haaretz, this book was “crowd-funded” by Israeli settler group “Wake Up North” to plant the “seeds of longing for Lebanon” in young children

Source: TRT World - Facebook

Gaza





Gaza

Lebanon



What was rescued from beneath the rubble of the library and archive of Mohammad Fakhr al-Din.



The destruction of the home, library, studio, and paintings of the artist Abdel Hamid Baalbaki.



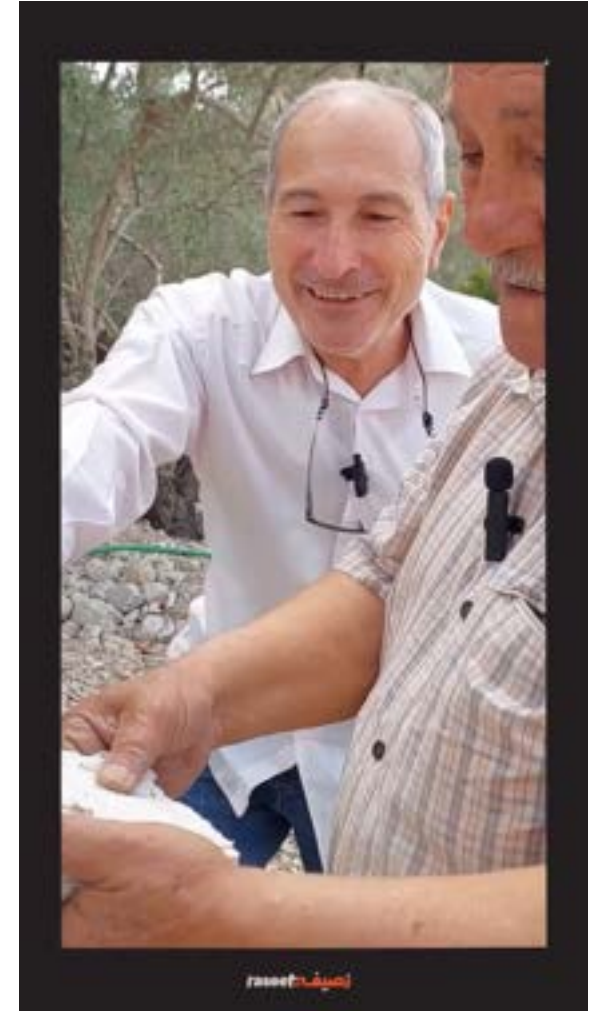
The Shrine of Prophet al-Shemaa



The library of Jalal Shreim.



What remained of the latest edition of the book *Al-Zubda al-Fiqhiyya*.



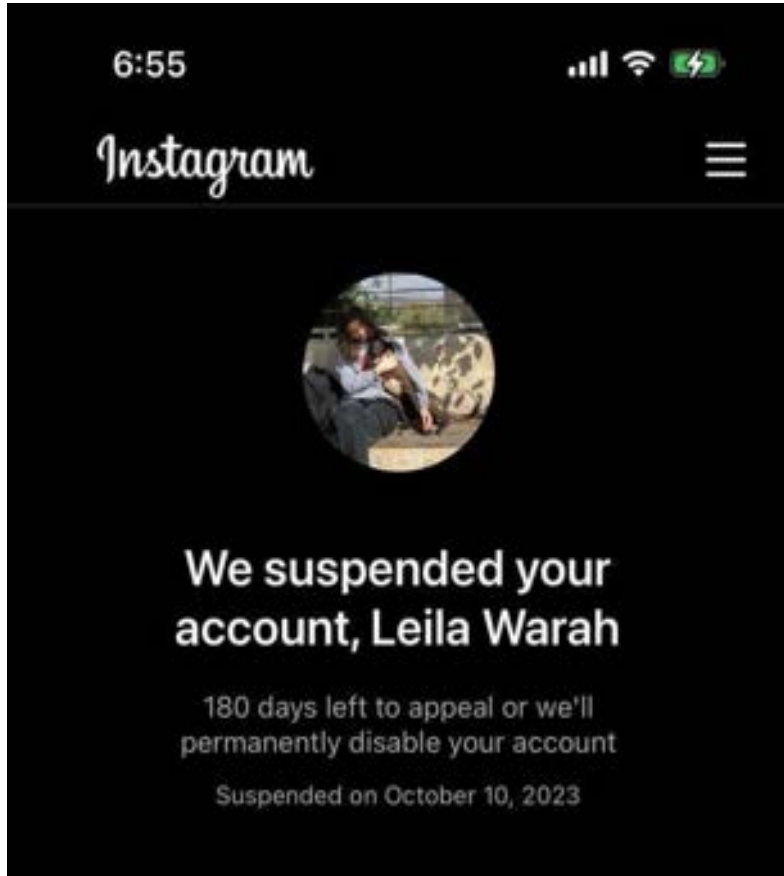
The Upside-Down “Archives” World

The war on Gaza & Lebanon has indeed revealed that we live in an *Upside-Down “Archives” World*

Where protection is **privilege**, destruction is **normalized**, and memory is weighed unequally by the **gravity of power**.

Protection as Privilege, Destruction as Normal

Context	Cultural Loss	Global Response
Notre-Dame, France (2019)	1 monument damaged	€850+ million pledged within days
Ukraine (2022–2025)	515 cultural sites damaged	UNESCO monitoring + ICA sanctions
Gaza (2023–2026)	150+ cultural sites destroyed	Silencing
Lebanon (2024–2025)	Libraries, heritage sites bombed	Silencing



Censorship and Erasure in the Age of Social Media

- Between October and November 2023, Human Rights Watch documented over 1,050 takedowns and other suppression of content Instagram and Facebook that had been posted by Palestinians and their supporters, including about human rights abuses.

- Human Rights Watch publicly solicited cases of any type of online censorship and of any type of viewpoints related to Israel and Palestine. Of the 1,050 cases reviewed for this report, 1,049 involved peaceful content in support of Palestine that was censored or otherwise unduly suppressed, while one case involved removal of content in support of Israel.



The Counter-Archive: A Renaissance from the Ruins of the Upside-Down World

- Social media became a counter-archive
- Every post, image, and video became evidence — documenting war crimes and preserving memory when institutions failed.
- Platforms like Telegram, X, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook became sites of archival insurgency, where Palestinians reclaimed authorship and narrative control.
- This digital resistance inverted the global archival hierarchy: power shifted from institutions to communities, from silence to testimony.
- In this Upside-Down 'Archives' World, Palestinians turned the very tools of surveillance and propaganda into instruments of survival and remembrance.

The Counter- Archive: A Renaissance from the Ruins of the Upside-Down World

Encounter Archives emerge when:

- Archives are destroyed or inaccessible
- Institutions are silenced or complicit
- Communities must document themselves

They are:

- Situated
- Immediate
- Community-driven
- Politically conscious

An encounter archive emerges at the moment of violence, when international institutions fail to act.

Reclaiming Our Voice

The Fighting Erasure Initiative, is working on developing the Palestine Oral History Archive ([POHA](#)) at AUB and expanding it to cover the Palestinian case from before the Nakba to the present, reflecting and preserving the Palestinian narrative in its own voice.

poha

[POHA thesaurus](#) (Beirut: Palestinian Oral History Archive, American University of Beirut) 

Through this work, we decolonize description: transforming standards once used to silence into tools of representation, resilience, and reclamation.

<https://www.loc.gov/standards/sourcelist/subject.html>

Training Program on Archiving Fundamentals

Online Course: Fundamentals of Archival Management & Emergency Mitigation

Launched a free, live online course—*Fundamentals of Archival Management & Emergency Mitigation in Palestine, Lebanon & the Global South*—providing foundational and applied training for archivists and records managers. The course was developed in response to urgent needs for archival capacity-building in contexts of conflict, displacement, and limited infrastructure.



Encounter Archives

Arabic Archival Guidelines

Two comprehensive guidelines in Arabic has been developed to support archivists, librarians, and heritage practitioners in adapting international archiving rules and standards to local contexts in Palestine, Lebanon, and the Arab region.

The guidelines address key components of archival and cataloging work, including classification and description, preservation and conservation, digitization and digital access, and ethical access policies. It is designed as a practical reference that bridges global standards with locally grounded realities and constraints.



Establishing the Union of Municipalities for Archiving and Documentation



Source: <https://english.almayadeen.net/videos/ai-glitch-exposes--israel---pro--israel--hasbara-calls-it-ou>

FactFinder, a pro-"Israel" AI bot designed for online propaganda has backfired, exposing "Israel's" apartheid policies instead. Built to defend Zionist narratives, the bot started contradicting its own mission, criticizing "Israel's" war on Gaza, debunking Israeli and its allies' lies about UNRWA, and even urging raising funds for Palestinian children.

- AI Learns from Crowdsourced and Public Data
- AI Learns from Large-Scale Data (The More Data, The Stronger the Narrative)
- AI Works on Pattern Recognition, Not Ideology
- AI Adapts Based on User Interactions (Reinforcement Learning)



What Counts as an Archive in 2026?

“We must ask: what is an archive today? A TikTok post by a survivor? A story that disappears in 24 hours? If we don’t preserve these fragments, they’re gone.”



Social Media Archive

Documenting civilians, bloggers, and journalists from Gaza, the West Bank, and the Palestinian diaspora

Media platforms for documenting the war and cultural destruction (health, education, infrastructure)

Documenting global public opinion: protests, boycott campaigns, diplomatic positions, and legal actions

We used the same strategy to archive the war on Lebanon in Fall 2024




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"verified": false,
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"profile_image": "https://pbs.twimg.com/profile_images/1599423206414336009/hw84vC7u.jpg",
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@ajMubasher / Public archive of Telegram messages.

2023

[Dec 2023 \(9602\)](#)

[Nov 2023 \(2398\)](#)

RSS feed. Made with tg-archive

- 1
- 2
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26 December 2023 (407 messages)

 @ajMubasher #184528 06:52 PM, 26 Dec 2023

من #مصر إلى #غزة.. ابنة الفنانة إيناس السقا تكشف عن مأساة بعد استشهاد أمها

الجزيرة_مباشر#

<https://ow.ly/xCkf50QIXSp>

من مصر إلى غزة.. ابنة الفنانة إيناس السقا تكشف عن مأساة بعد استشهاد أمها (فيديو)
 قالت فرح والدموع تذرف على وجنتيها للجزيرة مباشر "احنا لما رجعنا من مصر على غزة
 كنا مفكرين انو رح نيجي لحياة سعيدة بين الأهل والأصحاب"، موضحة أنها لم تكن تعلم
 أنها ستعيش آخر أيام مع عائلتها بهذه الحال

 @ajMubasher #184529 06:52 PM, 26 Dec 2023

عاجل | المتحدث باسم الجيش الإسرائيلي: نحتجز المئات من أسرى الحرب ومن لا نحتاجه نعيده إلى غزة

 @ajMubasher #184530 06:53 PM, 26 Dec 2023

لجنة برلمانية تركية تصادق على طلب #السويد الانضمام إلى الناتو.. وستوكهولم تعلق

[01 Dec 2023 \(436\)](#)

[02 Dec 2023 \(397\)](#)

[03 Dec 2023 \(386\)](#)

[04 Dec 2023 \(385\)](#)

[05 Dec 2023 \(388\)](#)

[06 Dec 2023 \(406\)](#)

[07 Dec 2023 \(416\)](#)

[08 Dec 2023 \(469\)](#)

[09 Dec 2023 \(286\)](#)

[10 Dec 2023 \(413\)](#)

[11 Dec 2023 \(293\)](#)

[12 Dec 2023 \(397\)](#)

[13 Dec 2023 \(361\)](#)

[14 Dec 2023 \(432\)](#)

[15 Dec 2023 \(401\)](#)

[16 Dec 2023 \(364\)](#)

[17 Dec 2023 \(322\)](#)

[18 Dec 2023 \(411\)](#)

[19 Dec 2023 \(333\)](#)

[20 Dec 2023 \(376\)](#)

[21 Dec 2023 \(312\)](#)



Gaza & Lebanon





Lebanon



Gaza



Gaza



Ashes of Knowledge







Lebanon





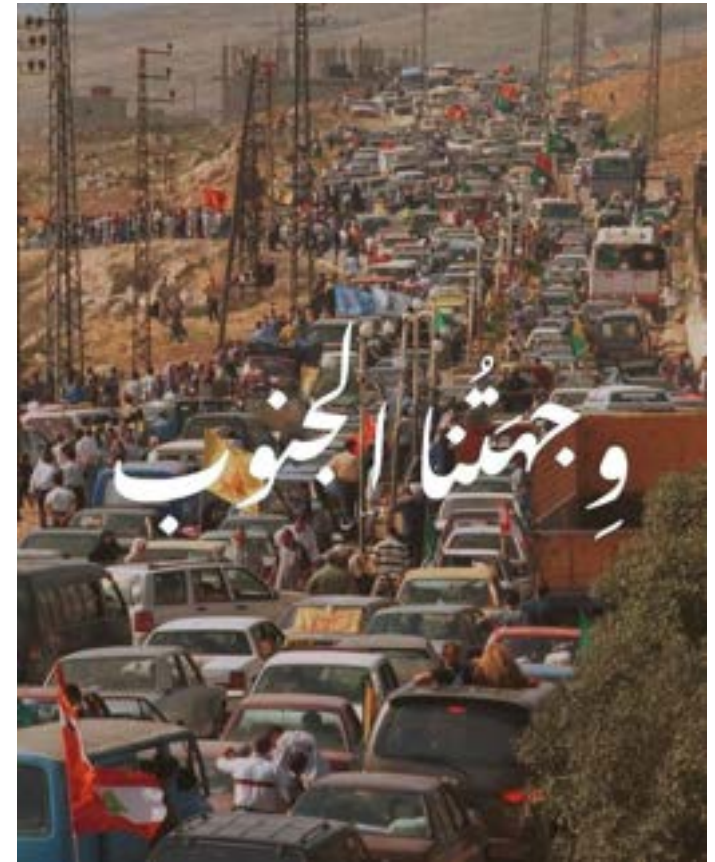
Architecture of Erasure



Drone video shows destruction in southern Lebanon after Israeli airstrikes







Our Stories... Our Archives





New types of Documentation





*The archive is never neutral.
It either resists erasure — or assists it.*

Thank you!!

