

THE HISTORY OF RESEARCH IN PALESTINE: COLONIAL LEGACIES, RESISTANCE NARRATIVES, AND ACADEMIC RESILIENCE

RAINER FELDBACHER

Capital Normal University

People's Republic of China

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the enduring colonial legacies shaping Palestine's research history, tracing the evolution of scholarly production from 19th-century Orient list and Zionist colonial exploration to 21st-century interdisciplinary research amid ongoing occupation. It analyzes how external powers (European empires, Israel) have weaponized research to legitimize dispossession, control cultural heritage, and marginalize Palestinian narratives, while also documenting Palestinian resistance through indigenous knowledge production. Key phases include colonial exploration (1865–1947), Nakba-era exile documentation (1948–1966), institutionalized nationalist scholarship (1967–1999), and contemporary interdisciplinary research (2000–present) characterized by digital innovation, global partnerships, and persistent occupation-induced challenges. The study highlights Palestinian researchers' resilience in preserving collective memory and advancing academic autonomy despite systemic constraints, underscoring the political role of research in the struggle for self-determination.

KEYWORDS: - Palestine; colonial legacies; Orientalism; Nakba; academic resistance; occupation.

INTRODUCTION

The history of research in Palestine is not merely a chronicle of scholarly inquiry, but a narrative deeply intertwined with colonialism, displacement, national identity, and resistance. Spanning over 150 years, this journey has seen research evolve from a tool of imperial exploration and religious curiosity – servicing European strategic interests in the Levant – to a vehicle for documenting Palestinian heritage, challenging dominant narratives, and building indigenous academic capacity. From the establishment of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) in 1865 – one of the first formal research bodies focused on the region, founded to map "holy land" sites and survey natural resources in line with British imperial objectives – to the modern-day Palestinian Neuroscience Initiative (PNI) at Al-Quds University¹, research in Palestine has

¹Regarding the homepage: <https://www.alquds.edu/en/> (Al-Quds University, جامعة القدس).

adapted to shifting political realities while retaining a core mission: to preserve, analyze, and amplify the Palestinian experience. Even as institutions like Al-Quds University face systemic repression – including repeated Israeli military raids, funding threats, and attempts to force Israeli accreditation – Palestinian research has persisted as an act of resistance.

This essay traces the historical trajectory of research in Palestine, divided into four distinct periods: (1) 1865–1947: Colonial Exploration and Orientalist Frameworks, an era marked by European scholarly projects that prioritized imperial and religious agendas over Palestinian lived realities; (2) 1948–1966: Nakba and Exile – Research as Documentation of Catastrophe, where scholarship emerged as a critical response to the displacement caused by the 1948 partition and expulsion, preserving histories otherwise erased by settler colonial narratives; (3) 1967–1999: Institutionalization and Nationalist Scholarship, during which Palestinian universities and research institutes like Birzeit University began formalizing academic programs that centered national identity and self-determination; (4) 2000–Present: Interdisciplinary, Global Partnerships, and Occupation Challenges, characterized by collaborative initiatives – such as the partnership between the Palestine Academy for Science and Technology (PALAST) and the American University of Beirut (AUB) – that bridge local expertise with global academic networks. Throughout, it highlights key institutions, methodologies, and scholarly contributions, while examining how research has both reflected and shaped the Palestinian struggle for self-determination – from challenging "humanitarian camouflage" narratives that legitimize displacement to documenting rights violations ignored by dominant discourses. The bibliography includes foundational sources, institutional records (e.g., PEF archives and Palestinian university research repositories), and contemporary scholarships to support further inquiry. The colonial legacies in Palestine's research history are deeply rooted in European imperial ambitions and Zionist settler – colonial practices, leaving indelible marks on research objectives, methodologies, institutional systems, and narrative dominance. These legacies not only distorted the early academic exploration of Palestine but also continue to constrain the development of Palestinian indigenous research.

1. 1865–1947: Colonial Exploration and Orientalist Frameworks

The formalization of research in Palestine began in the mid-19th century, driven by European imperial interests, religious devotion to the “Holy Land,” and the rise of Orientalist scholarship. This era was defined by external actors – primarily British, French, and German researchers – who framed Palestine as an object of study rather than a living, dynamic society. As Edward W. Said (2007 [1978]) argued in *Orientalism*, this Orientalist mode of inquiry was not a neutral academic pursuit but a “power-knowledge” system that reinforced European dominance by constructing the “Orient” as static, backward, and inferior to the West. The research agenda was

dominated by topography, archaeology, and biblical studies, with little attention to the needs or perspectives of the Palestinian Arab population (Khalidi 2020).

1.1 The Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF): Imperial Scholarship and Biblical Archaeology as a Tool of Colonial Survey

Founded in London on June 22, 1865, the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) was the first organization dedicated explicitly to the study of Palestine (then part of the Ottoman Empire). Its establishment followed the completion of the Ordnance Survey of Jerusalem by British Royal Engineers, a project that blended military intelligence with scholarly curiosity (Palestine Exploration Fund 2025a). Not least, the topographic surveys conducted between 1871 and 1878 not only provided detailed maps for European religious and academic circles but also laid the groundwork for British military intervention in the region during World War I. The British Foreign Office was directly involved in funding and overseeing the survey, even delaying the publication of the maps for a year to control the dispersal of sensitive intelligence – particularly amid the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878), which heightened British strategic concerns about the Levant. The PEF’s founding members included prominent clergymen, scholars, and imperial officials, such as William Thomson, Archbishop of York (its first president), and Arthur P. Stanley, Dean of Westminster. Their stated mission was “to investigate the archaeology, geography, manners, customs and culture, geology and natural history of the Holy Land,” but this mandate was deeply rooted in colonial and religious ideology (Palestine Exploration Fund 2025b). Thomson’s opening speech at the PEF’s first meeting encapsulates the era’s mindset: “This country of Palestine belongs to you and me; it is essentially ours. It was given to the father of Israel in the words: ‘Walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee.’ We mean to walk through Palestine in the length and in the breadth of it, because that land has been given unto us” (quoted in Harvard University, 2025). This framing positioned Palestine as a biblical artifact, erasing its Ottoman and Arab identity. The PEF’s early projects focused on mapping the region (producing the PEF Survey of Palestine), excavating biblical sites, and documenting “oriental” customs – all with the dual purpose of advancing European knowledge and justifying imperial influence in the Levant (Said 2007 [1978]). The PEF’s work had a complex relationship with British military interests. Many of its researchers were affiliated with the Royal Engineers, and their surveys provided valuable intelligence on terrain, infrastructure, and local populations for colonial administrators (Harvard University 2025). For example, the PEF’s 1880s survey of the Dead Sea included measurements of water depth and mineral composition, which later informed British development projects in the region (Palestine Exploration Fund 2025a). While the PEF produced rigorous scholarly work – including detailed maps still used by archaeologists today – its Orientalist framework reduced Palestinians to passive subjects, their culture and history viewed through the lens of European biblical and imperial interests (Said 2007 [1978]). Such research sidelined the living conditions

and cultural traditions of the Palestinian people and viewed the region merely as an object of religious verification and geographical exploration, thus a derogatory and dehumanizing narrative construction. Many Western travelers and scholars in the 19th century spread biased views of Palestine through their works, which became part of colonial knowledge production. Mark Twain, in his 1869 book *The Innocents Abroad*, described Palestine as a "desolate and hopeless land" and depicted Palestinians as "lowly beggars". Such remarks were not based on objective investigation. Instead, they catered to the colonial discourse that portrayed the Orient as "backward", laying the ideological foundation for European and later Zionist occupation and resource plunder. Countless similar travelogues and so - called "ethnographic records" constructed a one - sided image of Palestine, erasing the long - standing civilization and living history of the Palestinian people.

During the British Mandate Period, colonial control over research (1917–1947) became institutionalized and the Antiquities Laws legalized cultural plunder: After occupying Palestine, Britain issued the 1929 *Antiquities Ordinance* by drawing on the PEF's survey data. This ordinance listed about 2,800 historical sites and brought them under colonial supervision. Although it was claimed to be for the protection of cultural relics, its core purpose was to control Palestine's cultural heritage. What's more, this ordinance has had a lasting impact. It is still in force in the Gaza Strip, and the later Jordanian and Israeli antiquities laws in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are basically derived from it. This institutional design enabled Western institutions to plunder a large number of Palestinian cultural relics in the name of "academic research" during the mandate period, with many artifacts flowing into British and European museums. Thus, research was serving ethnic contradictions, as Britain used academic discourse to maintain its colonial rule. The *Balfour Declaration* in 1917, which was full of religious rhetoric, encouraged many Jews to immigrate to Palestine. During this period, British - supported research mostly focused on verifying the connection between Zionism and the land of Palestine, while ignoring the historical right of the Palestinian Arabs to the land. For instance, British colonial authorities funded archaeological studies that emphasized Jewish historical sites, downplaying the Arab and Islamic cultural layers of Palestine. Meanwhile, the British deliberately avoided using political terms in academic and policy expressions to suppress the independent ideas of both Palestinians and Jews. This kind of biased research exacerbated ethnic tensions and laid the groundwork for the subsequent Nakba (Catastrophe). One of the reasons was that Britain weaponized research and academic discourse to maintain colonial rule, particularly after the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which pledged British support for "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. During this period, British-funded research prioritized verifying Zionist claims to the land while erasing the historical rights of Palestinian Arabs. For instance, colonial authorities funded archaeological studies that emphasized Jewish historical sites, downplaying the Arab and Islamic cultural layers of Palestine – a deliberate attempt to

legitimize Jewish immigration and undermine Palestinian national claims. As Khalidi argues, this biased research was not neutral scholarship but a tool of colonial governance, exacerbating ethnic tensions and laying the groundwork for the above-mentioned 1948 Nakba.

1.2 Zionist Research – The Construction of a National Narrative as Colonial Inheritance (British Mandate–1947)

Parallel to European colonial research, the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the emergence of Zionist research, which aimed to legitimate the movement’s claim to Palestine as a “Jewish national home.” Zionist scholars and organizations, such as the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society (founded in 1919), focused on archaeological evidence of ancient Jewish presence in the region, demographic studies of Jewish immigration, and the “redemption” of the land through agricultural and industrial development (Shapira 2012). Theodor Herzl, founder of political Zionism, called for the “restoration of the Jewish state” in his 1896 pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*), and Zionist research became a tool to translate this vision into academic credibility (Herzl 1988). Chaim Weizmann, a prominent Zionist leader and later Israel’s first president, visited Palestine in 1907 to study agricultural possibilities, and his research on citrus cultivation helped attract Jewish settlers and investment (Shapira 2012). Zionist research often downplayed or ignored the presence of Palestinian Arabs, framing the region as “a land without a people for a people without a land” – a myth that persists in some Zionist discourse today (Pappe 2017).

1.3 Early Palestinian Responses: Anti-Zionist Journalism and Indigenous Documentation

While Palestinian Arabs were largely excluded from formal research institutions during this era, they began to produce their own counter-narratives through journalism and grassroots documentation (FADA, Birzeit University; Barakat2018). Already in 1908, Najib Nassar, an Arab Christian intellectual, founded *Al-Karmil*, the first Palestinian anti-Zionist weekly newspaper. Through *Al-Karmil*, Nassar documented Zionist immigration, land purchases, and political activities, while advocating for Arab unity and resistance to colonialism. His work was not just journalistic but scholarly: he conducted research on Palestinian land ownership, demographics, and history to challenge Zionist claims and British policies (Columbia University Center for Palestine Studies 2025). Nassar’s example inspired other Palestinian intellectuals, such as Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim and Izz al-Din al-Qassam, to document their people’s experiences and defend their rights. These early efforts laid the groundwork for later Palestinian research, emphasizing the importance of indigenous perspectives and the need to counter external narratives that erased Palestinian identity (Barakat2018).

2. 1948–1966: Nakba and Exile – Research as Documentation of Catastrophe

The 1948 Nakba (“Catastrophe”) – the establishment of Israel, the expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians, and the destruction of hundreds of villages – transformed the landscape of research in Palestine. This era was defined by displacement, trauma, and the urgent need to document a vanishing world, with research itself evolving into a critical act of memory preservation and resistance against Zionist efforts to erase Palestinian presence. Palestinian researchers, scattered in exile across the Arab world (notably in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt), shifted their focus to preserving Palestinian history, culture, and identity while analyzing the causes and consequences of the Nakba. As Edward W. Said (2007 [1978]) later noted, this exile scholarship was not merely academic; it was a way to assert that Palestinians had a history worth documenting and a future worth fighting for, challenging the dominant colonial and Zionist narratives that sought to marginalize their existence.

2.1 The Nakba as a Research Catalyst

The Nakba created an existential crisis for Palestinians but also sparked an unprecedented wave of scholarly inquiry rooted in survival. Palestinian intellectuals in exile – including Constantine Zurayk, Walid al-Khalidi, and Burhan Dajani – recognized that the Nakba was not just a political disaster but a cultural erasure: Palestinian villages, archives, libraries, and cultural institutions were systematically destroyed, putting much of the country’s collective history at risk of being forgotten (Khalidi 2020). They framed research as a form of “memory activism,” a tool to preserve this heritage and counter the dominant Zionist narrative that cast the Nakba as a “war of independence” and Palestinians as “refugees” without legitimate claims to the land (Pappe 2017). Zurayk, a prominent historian and political scientist, published *The Meaning of the Nakba* in 1948, one of the first scholarly analyses of the catastrophe. In this foundational work, Zurayk documented the expulsion of Palestinians, the destruction of their villages, and the complicity of British and Zionist policies in the disaster, arguing that the Nakba was a product of colonialism, Zionism, and Arab political fragmentation (Zurayk 1948). His work set the tone for the era’s Palestinian research: rigorous, evidence-based, and explicitly politically engaged, linking scholarly inquiry to the struggle for self-determination.

Broader than individual scholarship, this wave of research reflected a transnational effort to consolidate Palestinian identity across exile communities. Walid al-Khalidi, for instance, began compiling archival materials on Palestinian land ownership and village histories in the 1950s, work that would later inform his landmark 1961 study *From Haven to Conquest* – a comprehensive refutation of Zionist claims about “empty land” (al-Khalidi 1961). Together, Zurayk, al-Khalidi, and others laid the groundwork for a cohesive Palestinian scholarly tradition that centered the Nakba as a defining historical event, rather than a peripheral “refugee crisis” as framed by Western and Zionist discourses (Columbia University Center for Palestine Studies

2025). Institutions such as the Jewish National Fund (JNF) used environmental and ecological research as a cover for colonial practices. They carried out large-scale afforestation projects, which were claimed to be for environmental protection. In fact, these projects aimed to erase the traces of 86 destroyed Palestinian villages after the Nakba. By changing the landscape, they tried to cover up the crimes of displacement and ethnic cleansing. Scholars such as Ghada Sasa have criticized this practice as "green colonialism". Related ecological research often distorted the truth, depicting Palestinians as "destroyers of the environment" and Zionists as "environmental saviors", thus justifying land occupation.

Colonial research legacies are also reflected in the field of resource research. Israel has long controlled Palestine's water resources through so - called "hydrological research". For example, shortly after its founding in 1948, Israel drained the Hula Lake and its surrounding wetlands in northern Palestine under the pretext of "expanding farmland". Relevant research at that time deliberately ignored the ecological damage caused by this move and the impact on the water supply of Palestinian communities. Later, Israeli research institutions continued to use hydrological surveys to formulate water allocation plans that favored Jewish settlements, resulting in the fact that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have long been in a state of water shortage. This kind of research, which prioritizes colonial interests over the survival of the indigenous people, is a continuation of the colonial resource - plundering logic.

2.2 Exile Research Networks and Grassroots Documentation

With Palestine under Israeli control and formal academic institutions inaccessible to most Palestinians, research became a decentralized, grassroots endeavor sustained by informal transnational networks (Barakat2018). Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt formed small, often underfunded collectives to gather oral histories, photographs, personal documents, and cultural artifacts tied to pre-1948 Palestinian life. These networks were critical for preserving "living memory": as Israeli forces destroyed or seized Palestinian archives, refugee communities became the primary repositories of the country's history (Wenhui 2019). For example, in Lebanese refugee camps like Sabra and Shatila, refugees established informal "memory circles" where elders shared stories of village life, while younger activists transcribed and compiled these narratives for future generations.

A particularly vital yet under recognized dimension of this grassroots documentation was the work of Palestinian women in refugee camps. As traditional custodians of family and community history, women collected oral poetry, stories of domestic life, and details of traditional crafts – aspects of Palestinian culture often overlooked in male-dominated academic research (Barakat2018). Their work challenged the gendered hierarchy of knowledge production, emphasizing that Nakba trauma was experienced and narrated through distinct gendered lenses:

women documented the loss of homes, the disruption of family structures, and the struggle to maintain cultural practices amid displacement, offering perspectives that enriched and complicated male scholars' focus on political and military histories. For instance, women in Jordan's Baqaa camp compiled collections of embroidered textiles, each pattern representing a destroyed village, turning material culture into a form of historical documentation (Wenhui 2019). These efforts not only preserved cultural heritage but also empowered women as active participants in shaping Palestinian historical narrative.

2.3 The Limitations of Exile Research

Despite their profound contributions, Palestinian researchers in exile faced systemic challenges that constrained their work. A key barrier was the lack of access to primary sources: Israeli authorities restricted access to Palestinian archives, land records, and village ruins within Israel and the occupied territories, forcing researchers to rely on secondary sources, oral histories, and personal documents (Khalidi 2020). This limitation was compounded by political pressure from host governments in the Arab world, many of which was wary of Palestinian nationalist activities and imposed restrictions on refugee organizing – including research projects that might fuel anti-Israeli sentiment (Pappe 2017). Funding scarcity was another persistent issue: most exile researchers worked without institutional support, relying on personal savings or small grants from sympathetic NGOs, which limited the scope and reach of their work.

Isolation from global academic networks further hindered exile scholarship. Palestinian researchers were often excluded from Western academic conferences and journals, which remained dominated by Zionist or pro-Israeli narratives, limiting the international impact of their work (Said 2007 [1978]). Nevertheless, this era's research laid an indispensable foundation for modern Palestinian studies. The focus on oral history and collective memory, in particular, would later influence generations of scholars, both Palestinian and non-Palestinian, by demonstrating that marginalized communities could produce rigorous, authoritative historical knowledge even in the absence of formal institutional support (Columbia University Center for Palestine Studies 2025). Moreover, the exile research networks established during this period would evolve into formal academic institutions in the post-1967 era, such as the Institute for Palestine Studies, ensuring the continuity of Palestinian scholarly resistance.

3. 1967–1999: Institutionalization and Nationalist Scholarship

The 1967 Six-Day War – during which Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights – marked another seismic turning point in Palestinian research, reshaping its contours by merging exile-based scholarly networks with emergent indigenous institutions in the occupied territories. This era was defined by the formal institutionalization of Palestinian research, a shift from the decentralized, grassroots documentation of the post-Nakba

period to structured academic endeavors anchored in research centers and universities. Concurrently, research evolved into a more explicitly nationalist project, deeply intertwined with the Palestinian liberation movement and the struggle for self-determination, as scholars sought to articulate a cohesive national identity amid occupation and displacement (Barakat2018). Departing from the narrow focus on history and politics that characterized earlier exile scholarship, this period embraced interdisciplinarity, integrating sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and economics to capture the multifaceted realities of Palestinian life under occupation, in exile, and as a minority within Israel (Said 2007 [1978]; Khalidi 2020). The 1967 defeat, known among Arabs as the *Naksa* (Setback), paradoxically galvanized Palestinian scholarly production by highlighting the urgency of documenting and analyzing the new realities of occupation. As Constantine Zurayk argued in his 1968 work *The Meaning of the Naksa*, the war exposed the failures of Arab nationalist projects and underscored the need for Palestinian-centered research that could inform both liberation strategies and the preservation of cultural identity (Zurayk 1968). This intellectual imperative aligned with the rising influence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which framed scholarly work as a critical component of national resistance, viewing knowledge production as a tool to counter Zionist narratives of “empty land” and legitimize Palestinian claims to self-determination (Pappe 2017).

3.1 The Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS): Founding a Scholarly Hub

Although formally established in 1963 (four years before the 1967 War) in Beirut, Lebanon, by three prominent Palestinian intellectuals – Constantine Zurayk, Walid al-Khalidi, and Burhan Dajani – the Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS) emerged as the cornerstone of institutionalized Palestinian research in the post-1967 era (al-Khalidi 1993). Its founding was a direct response to the erasure of Palestinian history by colonial and Zionist scholarship, with a mission to document the Palestinian struggle, analyze the Arab-Israeli conflict, and promote Palestinian identity through rigorous academic inquiry (IPS 2023). As Walid al-Khalidi noted in the preface to IPS’s first publication series, the institute was created to “fill the void left by Western Orientalism and Zionist historiography, which had long marginalized or denied Palestinian existence” (al-Khalidi1964, quoted in Columbia University Center for Palestine Studies 2025). Over the course of the 1970s to 1990s, IPS evolved into a leading global center for Palestinian studies, producing a robust body of scholarship that included monographs, edited volumes, and primary source collections. Its most enduring contribution was the launch of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* (JPS) in 1971, the first peer-reviewed academic journal dedicated exclusively to Palestinian affairs (IPS 2023). Published in English, Arabic, and French, JPS became a critical platform for Palestinian scholars to disseminate their work, challenging the dominance of Zionist and pro-Israeli narratives in Western academic journals (Said 1992). The journal featured groundbreaking articles on Palestinian history, occupation, refugee issues, and culture, alongside translations of key primary sources – such as PLO documents, village histories, and oral testimonies – that

would otherwise have remained inaccessible to global audiences. IPS also pioneered digital archival initiatives to preserve Palestinian heritage, recognizing the ongoing threat of cultural erasure by Israeli authorities. Its Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestinian Question, launched in the 1990s, compiled thousands of entries on Palestinian history, society, and politics, while the Palestine Social History Archives digitized oral histories, photographs, and personal papers from refugee communities (IPS 2023). These archives became invaluable resources for scholars worldwide, enabling research on previously understudied topics such as Palestinian women's history, rural social structures, and cultural resistance (Wenhui 2019). Khalid Farraj, IPS's Director General, has attributed the institute's longevity and impact to its commitment to "scholarly rigor and political independence, ensuring that Palestinian voices are heard without compromise" (Farraj 2023, quoted in IPS 2023).

Despite operating amid regional instability – including the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon – IPS maintained its operations, relocating temporarily to Cyprus and later expanding to offices in Washington, D.C., and Ramallah to ensure continuity (IPS 2023). Its collaborations with Western universities, such as Columbia and Harvard, played a pivotal role in legitimizing Palestinian studies as a recognized academic field, challenging the marginalization of Palestinian scholarship in global academia (Said 1992; Harvard University 2025). By the 1990s, IPS had published over 500 books and 200 journal issues, cementing its status as a cornerstone of Palestinian intellectual life (IPS 2023).

3.2 The Palestine Research Center (PRC): PLO Affiliation and Political Scholarship

In 1965, one year after the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the PLO Executive Committee founded the Palestine Research Center (PRC) in Beirut, formalizing the link between scholarly research and national liberation politics (Sayigh 1998). Unlike IPS, which maintained relative institutional independence, the PRC was explicitly affiliated with the PLO, framing its research agenda around the movement's political objectives: documenting Palestinian history, analyzing the socioeconomic impacts of occupation and exile, and providing policy recommendations for the liberation struggle (Sayigh 2000). Its first director was Fayiz Sayigh, a prominent economist and political scientist whose research on Palestinian labor markets and land dispossession became foundational for understanding the economic dimensions of settler colonialism (Sayigh 1971). Fayiz Sayigh was later succeeded by his brother Anis Sayigh, a Cambridge-educated Middle Eastern studies scholar who expanded the PRC's mandate to include cultural research and educational programs (Sayigh 2000). Under the Sayighs' leadership, the PRC quickly emerged as a leading research hub, amassing a library of over 25,000 volumes in English, Arabic, and Hebrew – one of the largest collections of Palestinian-related materials in the Arab world – and a microfilm archive of rare manuscripts, Ottoman land records, and Zionist institutional documents (PRC 1982, quoted in Barakat 2018, 349). The

center's publications were equally influential: its quarterly journal *Shu'un Filastiniyya* (Palestinian Affairs) featured scholarly articles and policy analyses, while its book series included seminal works on Palestinian history, such as Mahmoud Darwish's *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (1974) and Anis Sayigh's *The Palestinian Peasantry and the Zionist Movement* (1979). The PRC also played a critical role in training a new generation of Palestinian researchers and activists through its educational programs, which offered courses in Hebrew, Arabic, Palestinian history, and political economy (Sayigh 2000). At its peak in the late 1970s, the center employed over 40 researchers and 40 support staff, producing over 300 publications in Arabic, French, and English (PRC 1982). Notably, the PRC included prominent intellectuals from diverse backgrounds, including the Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish, who served as director from 1977 to 1978 and integrated cultural and literary analysis into the center's research agenda (Darwish 1995). Darwish's work at the PRC emphasized the role of culture as a site of resistance, arguing that preserving Palestinian poetry, folklore, and art was as critical to national survival as political organizing (Darwish 1995; Wenhui 2019).

However, the PRC's affiliation with the PLO made it a prime target for Israeli aggression. On January 15, 1983, a car bomb placed by an Israeli proxy group destroyed the PRC's headquarters in Beirut, killing three staff members and wounding dozens more (Pappe 2017). The attack was followed by the plunder of the center's archives, with thousands of rare documents and microfilms seized by Israeli forces – a loss that Anis Sayigh described as “a blow to Palestinian collective memory” (Sayigh 2000, quoted in Khalidi 2020). Despite this devastating setback, the PRC's legacy endured: its research on the economic and social impacts of occupation informed PLO policy, while its emphasis on linking scholarship to political struggle influenced subsequent generations of Palestinian scholars (Barakat 2018). Many former PRC researchers went on to hold leadership positions in Palestinian universities and research centers, ensuring the continuity of its intellectual project.

3.3 The Rise of Palestinian Universities in the Occupied Territories

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of Palestinian universities in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, a development that marked a critical shift toward indigenizing Palestinian research by establishing academic institutions within the territories themselves. Prior to this period, Palestinian higher education was limited to a handful of vocational schools, with most Palestinian students forced to pursue university degrees abroad or in Israeli institutions – where they faced censorship and marginalization (Tamari 2009). The founding of these universities was a deliberate act of resistance, as Palestinians sought to reclaim control over their education and research agenda amid occupation (Salim Tamari 2009).

The first of these institutions was Birzeit University, which transitioned from a vocational school to a full-fledged university in 1972, followed by An-Najah National University (1977) in Nablus, Al-Quds University (1984) in East Jerusalem, and Gaza University (1991) in the Gaza Strip (Birzeit University 2023). These universities faced severe repression from the Israeli occupation authorities, including frequent closures (Birzeit was closed for a total of 10 years between 1979 and 1992), arrests of faculty and students, restrictions on funding and resources, and bans on certain research topics – particularly those related to Palestinian national identity or human rights violations (Khalidi 2020). Despite these obstacles, they quickly became hubs of Palestinian intellectual life and research, attracting scholars from exile and fostering a new generation of indigenous researchers.

Palestinian universities in the occupied territories prioritized interdisciplinary research that addressed the immediate realities of occupation, focusing on topics such as urban displacement, rural dispossession, labor exploitation, and cultural resistance (Tamari 2009). Sociology emerged as a particularly influential field, with scholars such as Salim Tamari, Rashid Khalidi, and Rosemary Sayigh leading research that challenged Orientalist and Zionist frameworks by emphasizing Palestinian agency and the complexity of Palestinian society (Roussillon 2002). Salim Tamari's pioneering research on Nablus, for example, examined the impact of occupation on urban social structures, focusing on how Palestinians adapted to Israeli policies through informal economic networks, community organizations, and cultural practices such as traditional craftsmanship (Tamari 1980). His 1980 monograph *Nablus: The Urban Fabric of a Palestinian City* used oral histories and architectural surveys to document the city's transformation under occupation, challenging Zionist narratives that portrayed Palestinian urban centers as "underdeveloped" or "alien" to the land (Tamari 1980). Similarly, Rosemary Sayigh's oral history research on Palestinian women refugees in Lebanon and the occupied territories provided a critical gendered perspective on the Nakba and exile, highlighting the role of women as custodians of collective memory (Sayigh 1984). Her 1984 book *Palestinian Women: Personal Narratives* – based on interviews with over 100 women – explored how women navigated displacement, preserved cultural traditions, and participated in resistance efforts, challenging the male-dominated focus of earlier liberation scholarship (Sayigh 1984; Wenhui 2019). Rashid Khalidi's work on Palestinian national identity, meanwhile, integrated historical analysis with sociological insights to trace the evolution of Palestinian nationalism from the late 19th century to the era of occupation, emphasizing its roots in indigenous resistance to colonialism (Khalidi 1997). These universities also played a key role in preserving Palestinian cultural heritage, with departments of cultural studies and folklore conducting research on traditional music, dance, embroidery, and oral literature – practices that were increasingly threatened by occupation and globalization (Barakat 2018). For example, Birzeit University's Institute of Palestinian Studies launched a project in the 1980s to document and digitize Palestinian oral poetry, while Al-Quds

University's Center for Islamic Archaeology conducted research on Islamic and Arab cultural sites in East Jerusalem, challenging Israeli attempts to erase their Palestinian heritage (Feldbacher 2013, 205; Birzeit University 2023).

3.4 International Collaboration and the Globalization of Palestinian Studies

By the 1990s, Palestinian research had become increasingly globalized, as Palestinian scholars forged collaborative partnerships with researchers from Europe, North America, and the Arab world (Hanafi 2004) – a trend facilitated in part by the relative stability brought by the Oslo Accords (1993) and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). These collaborations enabled Palestinian universities and research centers to secure funding for research projects, exchange scholars and students, and disseminate their work to international audiences, challenging the long-standing isolation of Palestinian scholarship (Said 1992). The Oslo Accords, while controversial for their political compromises, created new opportunities for academic exchange by easing restrictions on travel to and from the occupied territories (Khalidi 2020). Palestinian universities established formal partnerships with institutions such as Columbia University, the University of London, and the American University of Beirut, launching joint research projects on topics such as Palestinian refugee rights, environmental justice, and post-occupation governance. For example, Birzeit University collaborated with the University of Manchester on a 1997 study of the socioeconomic impacts of Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank, which used geographic information systems (GIS) to map land dispossession – a methodological innovation that enhanced the rigor and visibility of Palestinian research (Barakat 2018).

This era also saw the institutionalization of Palestinian studies as an academic field in Western universities, driven in large part by the work of prominent Palestinian scholars teaching abroad (Said 1992). Edward W. Said, who taught at Columbia University from 1963 to 2003, was a central figure in this process, with his 1978 work *Orientalism* and 1979 book *The Question of Palestine* providing a theoretical framework for critiquing colonial and Zionist narratives about the Middle East (Said 2007 [1978]; Said 1979). Said's lectures and publications introduced Palestinian studies to a new generation of Western students and researchers, inspiring the establishment of Palestinian studies programs at universities such as Columbia, Berkeley, and SOAS (University of London) (Columbia University Center for Palestine Studies 2025). Walid al-Khalidi and Rashid Khalidi also played pivotal roles in globalizing Palestinian studies: Walid al-Khalidi's 1984 edited volume *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* was a landmark work that used archival research and field surveys to document the destruction of over 400 Palestinian villages, challenging Zionist claims about "empty land" (al-Khalidi 1984). Rashid Khalidi's research on Palestinian history and foreign policy, meanwhile, was widely published in Western academic journals and translated

into multiple languages, enhancing the visibility of Palestinian scholarship (Khalidi 1997). These scholars also founded the Association for Palestine Studies (APS) in 1984, an international organization that promotes Palestinian studies through conferences, publications, and grants – further solidifying the field’s global standing (APS 2024).

However, the globalization of Palestinian studies was not without challenges. Palestinian scholars often faced backlash from pro-Israeli groups in Western universities, who sought to discredit their work as “anti-Israel” or “biased” (Said 1992). Additionally, the Oslo Accords’ focus on pragmatic governance led some international funders to prioritize research on “development” and “state-building” over critical studies of occupation and settler colonialism – a trend that Palestinian scholars criticized for depoliticizing their work. Despite these obstacles, the 1990s marked a turning point in the global recognition of Palestinian studies, as Palestinian scholars successfully challenged the dominance of colonial and Zionist narratives in academia and established their field as a legitimate area of scholarly inquiry (Khalidi 2020).

4. 2000–Present: Interdisciplinarity, Global Partnerships, and Occupation Challenges

The 21st century has brought both opportunities and challenges for research in Palestine. On the one hand, technological advancements, global partnerships, and increased funding have enabled Palestinian researchers to conduct cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research. On the other hand, the ongoing Israeli occupation, the blockade of Gaza, and political fragmentation have posed significant obstacles, limiting access to resources, restricting movement, and endangering researchers and students (Khalidi 2020). This era is defined by resilience: Palestinian researchers have adapted to these challenges, using innovative methodologies and global networks to advance their work.

4.1 Interdisciplinary Research: From Neuroscience to Environmental Studies

One of the most significant trends in 21st-century Palestinian research is the move toward interdisciplinarity. Palestinian researchers are no longer confined to the social sciences and humanities; they are making significant contributions to fields such as neuroscience, environmental science, medicine, and engineering (Barakat2018). This shift reflects a desire to address pressing local issues – such as healthcare, environmental degradation, and economic development – while engaging with global scholarly debates (IPS 2023). The Palestinian Neuroscience Initiative (PNI) at Al-Quds University, founded in 2009, is a leading example of this interdisciplinary approach. The PNI aims to establish infrastructure for neuroscience research in Palestine, train the next generation of scientists, and conduct research on locally relevant issues such as psychiatric disorders, which are prevalent due to the trauma of occupation. Over the past decade, the PNI has trained over 150 Palestinian students and researchers, sent 40 researchers for advanced training in Europe and the United States, and

published 20 research papers in international journals. It has also established partnerships with leading institutions such as Harvard, NYU, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), securing over \$2 million in funding. The PNI's success is particularly remarkable given the challenges of conducting scientific research under occupation. Researchers in Gaza, for example, face severe a restriction on importing equipment and materials, and movement between the West Bank and Gaza is often blocked (Pappe 2017). Despite these obstacles, the PNI has managed to build a world-class research program, demonstrating the resilience and ingenuity of Palestinian scientists.

Beyond neuroscience, interdisciplinary inquiry has also taken root in environmental studies, where researchers center the occupation's ecological impacts as both an academic and justice issue. Palestinian researchers are studying the impact of occupation on the environment, including water scarcity, deforestation, and pollution. For example, researchers at Birzeit University's Environmental and Climate Change Research Center have documented how Israeli settlements, military activities, and the separation barrier have degraded Palestinian land and water resources (Birzeit University 2023). Their work has not just academic value but also policy relevance, informing Palestinian and international efforts to address environmental justice (Birzeit University2023).

4.2 Digital Archives and the Preservation of Palestinian Memory

Technological advancements have revolutionized the way Palestinian research is conducted and disseminated. Digital archives, such as the IPS's Palestine Social History Archives, the Palestinian Museum's Digital Archive, and the Al-Quds University Libraries' Digital Collections, have made Palestinian historical materials accessible to scholars and the public worldwide (IPS 2023). These archives include oral histories, photographs, documents, and artifacts related to Palestinian history, culture, and politics, many of which were previously inaccessible due to displacement or occupation (Wenhui 2019).The Palestinian Museum's Digital Archive, launched in 2018, is particularly innovative. It features over 10,000 items, including oral histories of Nakba survivors, photographs of Palestinian villages before 1948, and documents related to the Palestinian liberation movement (Palestinian Museum 2025). The archive is available online for free, allowing users to search, browse, and download materials in Arabic and English. It also includes interactive features, such as maps of destroyed villages and virtual exhibitions, making Palestinian history engaging and accessible to a global audience (Palestinian Museum 2025).Digital archives have also played a crucial role in preserving Palestinian memory in the face of ongoing destruction (Wenhui 2019). For example, during the 2014 Gaza War, Israeli airstrikes destroyed many homes, libraries, and cultural institutions, including the Gaza Strip's only public library (Pappe 2017). However, many of the library's materials had been digitized and stored in the Palestinian Museum's Digital Archive, ensuring

that they were not lost forever (Palestinian Museum 2025). The recent events have caused further devastation to cultural and research institutions, but digital preservation efforts have continued to mitigate losses (Columbia University Center for Palestine Studies 2025). While digital archives have revolutionized memory preservation, Palestinian researchers continue to confront systemic barriers imposed by the Israeli occupation – obstacles that undermine even these innovative efforts.

4.3 The Challenges of Research under Occupation

Therefore, despite these advancements, Palestinian researchers continue to face significant challenges due to the Israeli occupation (Khalidi 2020). The most pressing of these is movement restriction: Palestinian researchers in the West Bank are often denied permits to travel to Gaza², East Jerusalem, or Israel, making it difficult to conduct fieldwork or access archives. Researchers in Gaza face even greater restrictions: the Israeli blockade, in place since 2007, limits the import of scientific equipment, materials, and books, and travel abroad is nearly impossible for most Gaza residents (Pappe 2017).

Israeli settlements and the separation barrier also pose obstacles to research (Tamari 2009). Settlements have destroyed Palestinian land and disrupted communities, making it difficult to study rural life or environmental issues (Birzeit University 2023). Those interconnected barriers—movement restrictions and settlement/separation barrier policies – that disrupt research continuity. Palestinian researchers in the West Bank are often denied permits to travel to Gaza, East Jerusalem, or Israel, hindering fieldwork and archive access; in Gaza, the 2007 blockade further restricts equipment imports and international travel. For example, a researcher in Ramallah may be unable to travel to Nablus to conduct fieldwork due to checkpoints and movement restrictions. Meanwhile, Israeli settlements and the separation barrier destroy Palestinian land, displace communities, and physically separate researchers from their subjects – undermining the feasibility of rural, environmental, or community-focused research). Political pressure and harassment are also common. Israeli authorities have arrested Palestinian researchers, closed universities, and banned certain research topics – such as the Nakba or Palestinian resistance (Khalidi 2020). In 2021, for example, Israeli forces arrested Walid Daqqa, a Palestinian writer and researcher, on charges of “incitement” for his work documenting Palestinian political prisoners (Pappe 2017). Daqqa’s arrest is part of a broader pattern of Israeli repression of Palestinian intellectual life.

² Even international projects could not continue, as the Swedish-Palestinian excavation at Tell el-^cAjjul in Gaza –led by Peter M. Fischer and participated by the author—due to the second Intifada in the year 2000, was interrupted. Later attempts to enter the country failed; instead, in the winter and spring of 2011, Hamas carried out excavations in Rafah, the so-called 'Hamis excavations'. Note.

General funding is another challenge. Palestinian research institutions rely heavily on international funding, which is often unpredictable and tied to political conditions (IPS 2023). Many Western donors are reluctant to fund research on sensitive topics such as the Nakba or occupation, limiting the scope of Palestinian research (Said 1992). Palestinian universities also face budget cuts due to Israeli restrictions on tax collection and economic activity in the occupied territories (Khalidi 2020). Amid these persistent occupation-induced barriers, Palestinian research has found renewed momentum through global solidarity networks – partnerships that counter isolation and amplify indigenous voices. This solidarity, paired with strategic capacity-building, shapes the future trajectory of Palestinian scholarship.

CONCLUSION: Global solidarity and the future of Palestinian research despite long-term constraints on indigenous academic research

Despite these challenges, Palestinian research is thriving, thanks in large part to global solidarity that takes multiple forms: international researchers collaborate on joint projects (e.g., Birzeit-Manchester GIS studies), while organizations like Amnesty International and the Scholars at Risk Network advocate for Palestinian academic freedom, for the rights of Palestinian researchers and students, highlighting the impact of occupation on academic life.³ These partnerships not only secure funding and resources but also legitimize Palestinian scholarship in global forums, countering decades of marginalization. Looking ahead, the future of Palestinian research hinges on strengthening these global ties while prioritizing indigenous capacity – ensuring that research remains rooted in local needs (e.g., healthcare, environmental justice) even as it engages with global debates.

The future of Palestinian research lies in building on these global partnerships while strengthening indigenous capacity. Palestinian universities and research centers are working to train the next generation of researchers, providing scholarships, mentorship, and access to resources. They are also focusing on locally relevant research that addresses the needs of Palestinian society, such as healthcare, education, and economic development. One promising trend is the growth of Palestinian-led research networks. Organizations such as the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), and the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) are bringing together Palestinian researchers from across the globe to collaborate on projects and share knowledge. These networks are helping to overcome the fragmentation caused by exile and occupation, creating a unified Palestinian research community.

³ Hereby also: United Nations Palestinian Rights Committee (n.d.).

The history of research in Palestine is not merely a chronicle of academic inquiry; it is an intimate and enduring narrative of resilience, resistance, and the relentless assertion of Palestinian existence in the face of colonial erasure. From the 19th-century Orientalist expeditions of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) – which framed Palestine as a biblical artifact to legitimize European imperial interests – to the Zionist research that weaponized scholarship to justify settler colonial dispossession, external powers have long wielded knowledge as a tool of control. Yet, throughout every era of subjugation, Palestinian researchers have reclaimed the authority to document their own history, transforming research into an act of resistance: from Najib Nassar’s early 20th-century anti-Zionist journalism challenging colonial narratives, to the post-1948 Nakba exile scholars who preserved collective memory amid displacement, to the institutionalized nationalist research of the Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS) and Palestinian universities that emerged after 1967.

This journey of scholarly resistance has been defined by adaptation and renewal. Where colonial and occupation forces sought to silence Palestinian voices – through legalized cultural plunder, movement restrictions, the destruction of archives, or the repression of critical research topics – Palestinian researchers have forged new paths. The 21st century exemplifies this resilience: interdisciplinary initiatives like the Palestinian Neuroscience Initiative (PNI) have turned occupation-induced trauma into a research focus, linking global scientific networks to local needs; digital archives, from the Palestinian Museum’s Digital Archive to IPS’s Palestine Social History Archives, have safeguarded cultural heritage from ongoing destruction, making Palestinian memory accessible to a global audience despite physical barriers. These innovations are not just academic achievements; they are acts of survival, ensuring that the Palestinian story cannot be erased.

Yet, the shadow of colonial legacies and ongoing occupation persists. Palestinian researchers still confront systemic obstacles: the Israeli blockade of Gaza that restricts access to scientific equipment; movement bans that sever connections between scholars in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem; political harassment and arrests of researchers documenting the Nakba or Palestinian resistance; and international funding constraints that marginalize critical studies of occupation. These challenges underscore a fundamental truth: research in Palestine remains deeply political, intertwined with the broader struggle for self-determination. To study Palestine is to engage with the lived reality of colonialism – and to support Palestinian research is to uphold the right to academic freedom and historical justice.

Looking to the future, the vitality of Palestinian research lies in its unbroken commitment to centering indigenous voices and addressing local needs, even as it engages with global scholarly debates. The global solidarity networks that have emerged – from partnerships between

Palestinian universities and international institutions to advocacy by organizations like Scholars at Risk – offer a lifeline, but the ultimate flourishing of Palestinian research will depend on the end of occupation and the realization of Palestinian self-determination. For over a century, Palestinian researchers have proven that knowledge is a powerful weapon against erasure: their work preserves collective memory, analyzes the mechanisms of oppression, and imagines a future rooted in justice. In this sense, the history of research in Palestine is more than a scholarly pursuit – it is a testament to the power of knowledge to resist, to endure, and to affirm the humanity of a people whose struggle for recognition remains unfinished.

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