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Lectures et discussions critiques

NASSAR Issam, Stephen SHEEHI, and Salim TAMARI. 2022. *Camera Palæstina: Photography and Displaced Histories of Palestine*

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Bibliographical reference



Full text

- 1 The collection of photographs compiled by the Palestinian civil servant and musician Wasif Jawhariyyeh during the late Ottoman and Mandate periods has a dramatic, not to say charmed, history. Accumulated over several decades before 1948, when Jawhariyyeh's family fled during the Nakba (Palestinian catastrophe of 1948), Wasif hid his albums, memoir and diaries inside a wall in his West Jerusalem home, where they remained inaccessible for almost twenty years. The Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967 enabled Wasif's brother to revisit their home, now inhabited by a foreign consulate, where he was allowed to dig into the stonework to recover the lost archive and return it to its original, now a refugee in Beirut. There, a copy of most of the material was made and donated to the Institute for Palestine Studies, although the most personal items left with the family to their current home in Athens, this avoiding the depredations of the Lebanese civil war and the 1982 invasion, when the IPS was itself looted by Israeli soldiers.
- 2 This perilous journey is not uncommon for Palestinian archives, often subjected to displacement, destruction and theft – most recently seen by the loss of irreplaceable municipal records in Israel's winter 2023 assault on Gaza. As Issam Nassar notes in *Camera Palaestina*, this confers an "excess level of importance" on Jawhariyyeh's accumulation of images and writings, not just for their content but their very existence. Of the three authors of this book, the social historian Salim Tamari and photographic studies scholar Nassar have both written widely on Jawhariyyeh, including publishing his fascinating, sometimes scandalous memoirs in full in Arabic and in edited form in English, as well as many articles and chapters analysing both his written and visual production.
- 3 This book adds to that output by presenting a wide-ranging description and analysis of another part of Jawhariyyeh's archive, a collection of seven photo albums titled *A Pictorial History of Jerusalem* and containing a large selection of images, mainly by commercial photographers. These were arranged and captioned by Jawhariyyeh to present a history of Palestine and particularly of his home city, as he saw it: dominated by portraits of powerful men and political and military events. This is not a history that gives much space to the subaltern – to women, the working classes or peasantry. But, as the authors argue, women in particular are very much present in the collection through the labour they contributed to the Palestinian photography industry, and their visual absence from the collection itself is contrasted with their prominence in Jawhariyyeh's memoirs and other writings – as family members, sex workers, singers, teachers and many other roles. Indeed, if, as the authors argue, Jawhariyyeh was seeking to present a very specific national image with his collection, one wonders how many images of women would have been available for him to include. And, as is also made clear throughout the volume, Jawhariyyeh's collection is the work of a Palestinian with a specific class, religious, gender, educational and regional specificity; he is not *the* Palestinian, and is no more (or less) authentic or representative than any other member of his wider society.
- 4 Nassar, Tamari and Sheehi offer three individually-authored chapters on different aspects of the collection, plus a collectively-written introduction and conclusion and a 'photographic interlude' comprising a selection of images from the albums along with Jawhariyyeh's collated captions – from the albums themselves, the substantial index he wrote to accompany it, and at times from

other sources where they shed more light on the topic. A major focus of the discussion is the extent to which even a selection of commercially or officially produced photographs are conferred with particular meanings by the acts of choosing and captioning undertaken by Jawhariyyeh; in this case, the authors interpret his vision as one that in many respects harks back to the late Ottoman period – when Jawhariyyeh was a child. Although the classic Arab nationalist view of this era is included in the collection, with images of public hangings, Jawhariyyeh also included numerous images of major figures such as Cemal Pasha and representations of events such as the visit of Kaiser Wilhem to Palestine and the arrival of an Ottoman naval launch for the Dead Sea.

- 5 As the authors stress, Jawhariyyeh's images should not be read as the kind of nostalgia with which many now view pictures of pre-1948 Palestine. Rather, Nassar, Tamari and Sheehi read Jawhariyyeh's work in ways strongly informed by anti-colonial thinking, as a critique – at times explicit, at others implicit – of the British and Zionist presence in Palestine, and as a conscious appropriation of even those photographs taken by colonial, corporate studios such as the American Colony. By way of example, Sheehi compares the American Colony's caption for an image of the opening of the Khalidiyyah Library (which ignores the important new cultural institution and identifies the men standing in front of it simply as Islamic scholars, in an Orientalist image of static religious knowledge) with that of Jawhariyyeh, which highlights the mixture of types of knowledge and expertise on show both in the contents of the library and the internationally networked, cutting-edge scholarship of the men who established it. As the authors insist, Jawhariyyeh did not and could not have known that the country's future lay with hundreds of thousands of refugees and mass displacement, and was engaging in a national conversation about what a future Palestine should look like, not looking back at a stolen homeland; as such as collection "de-exceptionalises" Palestine, showing it as little different to any other colonised country whose future would involve independence and nation-building. Indeed, they convincingly read Jawhariyyeh's collection, his presentation of it, and its continued existence as "an attestation that Palestine *exists today*".
- 6 As such, it is also noted that the collection contains almost no images of Zionist Jews newly arrived from Europe. Jawhariyyeh's personal circles and the images he selected include plenty of Old Yishuv Jewish friends and public figures. He also implicitly criticises his compatriots by the inclusion of haunting pictures of the ransacked homes of Jews killed in the massacre in Hebron in 1929 – whilst also incorporating into the timeline shots of the right-wing, militaristic members of Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionist movement who helped to provoke communal violence in the first place, and the naked torso, on a mortuary table, of a Palestinian man also killed by armed Zionists. Rare images such as the meeting of an emergency committee in the midst of WW1 depict members of the various Islamic, Christian and Jewish communities co-operating as part of a wider whole, but Jawhariyyeh consciously criticises those who do not want to be part of the existing society of Palestine.
- 7 As a co-authored book, *Camera Palaestina* works well: incorporating both individually written chapters and collective introductory and concluding pieces allows the particular knowledge and expertise of the three authors to be deployed to the full, whilst maintaining a sense of coherence and unity. Sheehi's writings in particular assume a lot of knowledge on the part of the reader, particularly of European theorists such as Jacques Rancière; for those coming from, for instance, a history background some more explication of the points being made would have made his section more comprehensible. The account of the collection's history notes that the materials held by the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut, copies of the family's originals, are less clear and sharp: in some ways, this works to the book's advantage, as even the paperback can thus contain numerous pictures on ordinary paper, rather than using the expensive glossy plates necessary to replicate the highest quality images. As with many academic books nowadays, though, the main issue of quality comes in the proofreading, which is notably poor, which is disappointing from such a respected press as the University of California.

References

Electronic reference

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