

# Historical Silencing and Epistemic In/Justice through the UNRWA Archive

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## Abstract

This article explores how historical silencing and epistemic in/justice occurs in and through the curation of UNRWA's central registry archive, now stored in Amman and previously located in Vienna, Gaza, and Beirut. Drawing on extensive work in the central registry and related archival collections, and critical archival theory, we show how the power dynamics of international aid, and the politics of the Palestine question, shape the collection's structure, content, and accessibility. We investigate the curation and selection of agency records, their organization, and their transparency or opacity to outsiders. In so doing, we illuminate how the curation of UNRWA's archive informs, shapes, and even distorts knowledge production on Palestinian refugee histories. By highlighting the interconnection between historical silencing and UNRWA's archives we expand understandings of the agency's complex, and at times contradictory, role in pursuing justice for Palestine refugees. Specifically, we unpack how the agency's curation of its archive can help promote its own preferred self-image, and how this speaks to tensions at the heart of UNRWA's role.

## Keywords

UNRWA; archive; epistemic justice; history; refugees; Palestine; silencing; exclusion.

UNRWA has often been described as a quasi-government or even a quasi-state for millions of Palestinian refugees across the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Active since

its creation by UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) in 1949 – and therefore virtually contemporaneous with the Palestinian refugee crisis – it provides services more typically the domain of the modern nation-state, including large-scale primary education and healthcare programs, municipal services in the camps, and registration procedures. While much has been made of the agency’s so-called quasi-state nature in socioeconomic and humanitarian terms, its role in documenting Palestinian refugee history is no less important. UNRWA is the only organization in the world that has continuously collected and maintained data about Palestinian refugees since the Nakba. The agency was created the year after the Nakba, began operations in 1950, and is still functioning today, meaning that its records span almost the entire duration of the Palestinian exile.

This has an added importance in view of Palestinian statelessness, which means there is no centralized national records bureau. While the Palestine National Archives can be found today in Ramallah, managed by the Ministry of Culture for the Palestinian Authority (PA), their contents reflect the significant constraints of the PA’s jurisdiction.<sup>2</sup> The earlier archive created by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) over the long 1970s was largely seized and many documents were subsequently destroyed by the Israeli army in its 1982 invasion of Lebanon, with a remainder traced years later to the Algerian desert.<sup>3</sup> Today, Palestinian researchers contend that the PA neglects the PLO’s institutions in favor of its own.<sup>4</sup> And although the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit has begun its own archival collection, it is limited in its ability to access materials outside Palestine.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of UNRWA’s collection in this fragmented archival landscape is manifold. UNRWA’s records collate Palestinian refugee data from across the Levant, spanning six decades. They also shed light on the complexities of the relationship between Palestinians, the international aid regime, the Arab host state governments, and Israel. In this context, UNRWA’s archive comprises something of a *de facto* Palestinian national archive.<sup>6</sup>

UNRWA is not the only UN agency charged with responding to the Palestinian refugee crisis. Twelve months before the UN General Assembly (UNGA) established UNRWA, it mandated the UN Conciliation Council for Palestine (UNCCP) to resolve the crisis. After UNRWA began operations in May 1950, the two UN agencies operated in parallel, with UNCCP managing political negotiations while UNRWA was mandated to provide essential relief. UNCCP had become inactive by the end of the decade, but not before collecting information on the extent of Palestinian losses from 1947 to 1949 and the refugees’ resulting compensation entitlements.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, Michael Fischbach’s monograph *Records of Dispossession*, based on findings in the UNCCP archive, confirmed the collection’s value to researchers – but the UN responded by closing it.<sup>8</sup> Since then, researchers, including one of the authors of this article, have been unsuccessful in their efforts to access the UNCCP files. While anyone can apply for access, applications usually remain in limbo, or receive a rejection months or even years later. In such a setting, the UNRWA archive gains added value as an alternative source of relevant information.

In this article, we examine the UNRWA central registry archive using the conceptual framework of “epistemic injustice,” a term coined by philosopher Miranda Fricker. This concept denotes injustice in relation to knowledge production, with

two particular forms identified. “Testimonial injustice” occurs when assessments of a statement’s credibility are based on prejudices about the speaker. “Hermeneutical injustice” takes place when exclusions and underrepresentation mean that a pool of knowledge is structurally distorted.<sup>9</sup> Through these ideas, Fricker builds on Gayatri Spivak’s pioneering earlier work on “epistemic violence”: the systematic silencing of subaltern voices within the colonial-imperial project.<sup>10</sup> More recently, political theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has built on both scholars’ ideas in her writings about the “potential history” that was erased by the colonial-imperial project’s hierarchical and selective forms of knowledge production. Through Azoulay’s work, we might think about possible alternative histories, narratives, and analyses.<sup>11</sup>

Both forms of epistemic injustice identified by Fricker are relevant to questions around UNRWA’s central registry archive. The latter is one of a number of data sources collected and held by UNRWA.<sup>12</sup> It contains legal, financial, and administrative documents about UNRWA’s various programs, its dealings with governments, and its personnel. Much existing scholarship on Palestinian refugee history and UNRWA draws heavily on the documents stored in this archive, which is akin to the agency’s institutional memory.<sup>13</sup> Comprising tens of millions of documents, this archive has considerable potential to support future research. Since its records transcend both geographical and temporal boundaries, it can help counter the dispersal that has plagued the Palestinian nation since the Nakba.

Yet while UNRWA’s programs may exhibit the trappings of public services, the agency is ultimately an international aid organization. As such, its decision-making power – including in relation to its archive – is concentrated in the hands of a small and overwhelmingly non-Palestinian team of bureaucrats and technocrats who comprise its senior management. Its archive accordingly risks reproducing the kind of silencing and distortions outlined above. With this in mind, it is germane to reflect on how the central registry might influence the production of Palestinian refugee history. Here we ask: is the UNRWA archive a source of epistemic justice, injustice, or both?

In this article, we examine this question from several angles. In the next section we discuss some of the key themes that have emerged from critical archival studies, and their relevance to Palestinian history. We then turn our attention to the structure, content, and administration of the central registry itself, examining the limitations these elements place on research and what they reveal about the agency’s role in shaping Palestinian refugee experiences. We use examples from our own research into the history of UNRWA’s education program to illustrate our core arguments. We conclude by reflecting on how our findings speak to bigger questions about voice, agency, and ownership in the context of structural disempowerment and disadvantage.

## **Critiquing the Archive**

The UNRWA archive is far from unique in the questions it raises. In fact, archiving per se is inherently interconnected with issues of epistemic in/justice, as scholars of critical archival studies have shown definitively. In the words of Jacques Derrida,

“There is no political power without control of the archives.”<sup>14</sup> This perhaps should be unsurprising; constructing an archive entails the collection and curation of documents, thus embedding the process in questions around which narratives and voices are preserved and prioritized. Such questions are especially potent when it comes to archives with marks of officialdom, such as those belonging to the state or to a prolific international institution like the UN.

Archives can accordingly play a key role in processes of “historical silencing,” a term coined by Michel-Rolph Trouillot and a concept that arguably serves as a de facto branch of epistemic injustice. Trouillot identified “the making of archives” as the second of four key moments at which historical silencing can occur. He named the others as: first, the making of sources; third, the making of narratives; and fourth, “the making of history in the final instance.”<sup>15</sup> Building on Trouillot’s influential work, Ann Laura Stoler has written at length about the processes behind the construction of archives, arguing that researchers should treat the latter as “cultural artifacts of fact production.”<sup>16</sup> Stoler advocates for a critical approach that treats both individual files and the archival collection as a whole as “subjects,” by paying attention to taxonomies and implicit assumptions. This is known as reading against the archival grain, as opposed to reading along it.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of such scholarship, historians and researchers have increasingly taken a critical approach to archival work, examining not only the contents of archives but also their curation and construction. Rosie Bsheer, for example, has conducted a comprehensive study of the subject in contemporary Saudi Arabia, showing that the Saudi regime’s efforts to construct a new national archive form part of its state-building efforts in the twenty-first century. Bsheer contends that the curation of the archive’s contents is deliberately designed to selectively erase certain histories and thus cement the state’s preferred narrative.<sup>18</sup>

On occasion, such scholarship has shaped events outside the academy. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, five elderly Kenyan men sued the British government for torture they had suffered during its repression of the anti-colonial Mau Mau uprising fifty years earlier. Their case made critical use of documentary evidence that the United Kingdom government had secretly moved and hidden, amounting to nearly nine thousand archival files from thirty-seven former colonies. Rather than being handed over to post-colonial governments at the point of independence, or held in the (open) National Archives in Kew, London, these files had been stored in secret at a site in Hanslope Park, outside London, and their existence essentially denied. As a result of the Mau Mau survivors’ case, in 2011 a British High Court judge forced the UK government to release the files. Their contents included evidence of the systematic abuse and mistreatment of Mau Mau prisoners held in British camps in Kenya in the 1950s, alongside other colonial atrocities. While these files are now accessible at the British National Archives in London,<sup>19</sup> there are still questions about how many more may remain hidden, or may have been destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

How is all this relevant to Palestinian history? There can be no question that the Palestinian people in general, and Palestinian refugees in particular, constitute “subalterns” as described by Spivak. Their subaltern status is multifaceted, comprised

of: their statelessness in an international system characterized by nation-state normativity; the resulting denial of their “right to have rights”;<sup>21</sup> and their manifold structural political, economic, and military disadvantages. As subalterns, they have been subjected to many kinds of epistemic injustice and violence of the type outlined by Fricker and Spivak, with their accounts regularly discredited or simply ignored.

Discussions of the implications are nothing new. In his influential 1984 essay “Permission to Narrate,” Edward Said wrote about the denial of the Palestinian people’s right to construct and share their own narratives.<sup>22</sup> Later that decade, Palestinian accounts of the Nakba were verified by the declassification of documents in the Israeli archives, and subsequent publications by Israel’s “New Historians.”<sup>23</sup> Although Palestinians had been recounting the facts of their expulsion for forty years at that point, it took the discovery of written documents by Israeli historians for such a narrative to be taken seriously in much of the Global North. With all this in mind, it is no overstatement to say that record keeping has a particular pertinence to the Palestinian struggle for justice.

Moreover, the seizure and/or destruction of historical records has been a regular and prolific element of what historian Rashid Khalidi calls the “hundred years’ war on Palestine.”<sup>24</sup> In 1948, the Haganah looted many Palestinian family libraries, particularly in the Old City of Jerusalem, including the collection of the prominent Nusseibeh family and the private papers of leading intellectual Khalil al-Sakakini. Their contents were classified as “Abandoned Property” and later showed up in the Jewish National Library of Hebrew University.<sup>25</sup> To take one specific example, the diary of Ottoman Palestinian soldier Ihsan Turjman was “lost” in 1948 and found at the Hebrew University Library in the 1970s. In 2011, scholar Salim Tamari published the diary along with his own extensive notes and account of its retrieval.<sup>26</sup> Such acts of retrieval have worked to counter the silencing of Palestinian histories but can come up against overwhelming challenges. It is important to observe that the vast majority of Palestinians cannot access Israeli archives, meaning that those documents not lost or destroyed have often been simply rendered inaccessible.<sup>27</sup> Such exclusions feed directly into the Palestinian people’s marginalized status – in the words of Azoulay, “[Palestinian] noncitizenship is predicated on an imperial archival regime . . . archival designations . . . have made [the Palestinian] ‘an infiltrator’.”<sup>28</sup>

The events of 1948 were in some ways repeated during the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut, where the PLO had established a parastate that included the Palestine Research Center, active from 1965. As part of its attack on Palestinian structures, the Israeli army looted the Research Center’s library, along with the contents of PLO offices across the capital and in the south of Lebanon. Shafiq al-Hout provides a microcosmic example of their practices when recalling how an Israeli officer seized his Palestinian passport after expressing shock that such an item had ever existed.<sup>29</sup> The looted PLO documents were taken to Israel, where some of them were published in Raphael Israeli’s controversial 1983 volume *PLO in Lebanon*, accompanied by a set of flawed translations.<sup>30</sup> At the end of that year, the PLO negotiated the return of the library to their office in Algiers, in exchange for six captured Israeli soldiers.<sup>31</sup>

As this shows, archiving and record keeping are not merely academic concerns when it comes to the Palestinian cause. In fact, many Palestinians have seen archival retrieval and construction as key elements of their struggle for justice. While considerable work has been carried out on the importance of oral history and testimonials in recording Palestinian history – particularly when it comes to the Nakba<sup>32</sup> – activists have paid no less attention to written documents.<sup>33</sup> Examples can be found in the work of the Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS), founded in 1963 in Beirut, the aforementioned PLO Research Center, and more recent moves by the PA to archive its own collection.<sup>34</sup>

Nor have such archiving efforts been limited to top-down actors. Many grassroots activists, predominantly Palestinians themselves, have worked to retrieve, restore, and retain historical evidence, often with a view to the place of such work in the wider national struggle.<sup>35</sup> In so doing, they have provided valuable sources for historians working in this area.<sup>36</sup> Examples include audio, visual, and audio-visual collections such as the Nakba Archive, Palestine Remembered, Palestine Open Maps, and Zochrot.<sup>37</sup> In Lebanon, the American University of Beirut houses the Palestinian Oral History Archive, curated by researchers and containing testimonies from Palestinians displaced to Lebanon in 1948 as well as other Palestinian communities in the country.<sup>38</sup> These archives challenge many of the epistemic injustices that plague institutional collections. Notably, many are digitized and freely available online, thus countering some of the aforementioned barriers to accessing physical records. The oral history collections foreground the voices and experiences of forcibly displaced Palestinians, while the map collections make innovative use of sources created by colonial authorities, to visually depict the losses and erasures suffered by the Palestinian nation.<sup>39</sup>

Other archives exist in what are arguably the most subaltern of sites: the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. In Shatila camp, for example, Mohammad al-Khatib curates and runs the Memories Museum, which holds artifacts and documents collected over the years from his Palestinian refugee family, friends, and neighbors. Miles to the south of al-Khatib's project, Mahmoud Dakwar has established a similar museum in the Khalil al-Wazir mosque in the town of Ma'shuq, between al-Buss and Burj al-Shamali camps. Both men see their work as important in maintaining pre-Nakba history for the generations born in exile.<sup>40</sup> Both collections provide an alternative to the depersonalized and clinical approach that characterizes institutional and state archives.

With all this in mind, it is safe to say that the issue here is more complex than simply the absence of a Palestinian archive. In fact, Palestinian history is recorded in numerous archives, but in ways that are fragmented, dispersed, and limited.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, these archives' curation often serves to uphold Palestinian silencing and disempowerment, under what Azoulay calls "the imperial archival regime." UNRWA's central registry functions within this broader archival context, illuminating some elements of this history while at the same time engendering more silences. In the following section, we turn our attention to its contents, organization, and curation.

## UNRWA's Central Registry

UNRWA's central registry comprises millions of documents dating from the late 1940s. Although the agency was established in 1949 and began operations in 1950, its archive includes some documents inherited from the voluntary agencies that operated under its predecessor, the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR). In keeping with an approximate twenty-five-year window for archiving, the most recent documents in the archive date from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Documents stored in this archive include code cables sent to and from UNRWA's headquarters and between field offices, internal staff memos, technical reports, and drafts of reports for public consumption, along with a great deal of correspondence between UNRWA, other UN agencies, and host state government representatives. However, UNRWA's policies and processes for archiving are opaque and researchers must navigate the central registry without clear information as to procedures for retention and classification.

To the best of our knowledge, two studies have been conducted on the potential of UNRWA's central registry to inform research and policy. The first was led by Howard Adelman, a professor affiliated with the Refugee Studies Center at York University in Canada. Conducted in the mid-1980s, Adelman's research was funded by the Ford Foundation; he described it in a report that also includes an inventory of the central registry.<sup>42</sup> A feasibility study was later carried out in the 1990s by Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik. This study was motivated by the political process at the time, and the potential of the archives to contribute to the restitution of refugee losses during final status talks. Tamari and Zureik went on to publish many of their findings in an edited volume with IPS.<sup>43</sup>

### Definitional Differences

Before considering which documents the central registry contains and whose perspectives these sources convey, it is essential to recognize that UNRWA does not and has never served all Palestinians, nor even all Palestinian refugees (nor has it claimed to). As such its archive does not provide a comprehensive account of the post-Nakba Palestinian experience. In fact, from the beginning, UNRWA has used a narrow definition of who constitutes a "Palestine refugee": "A person whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years preceding the outbreak of the conflict in 1948 and who, as a result of this conflict, lost both his home and means of livelihood."<sup>44</sup>

Developed with operational rather than legal considerations in mind,<sup>45</sup> this definition is used to determine eligibility for UNRWA's services rather than to confer legal status.<sup>46</sup> Consequently it is narrower than the legal definition provided by the 1951 Refugee Convention, from which UNRWA-registered Palestinians are excluded. Eligibility for UNRWA's refugee status also mimics discriminatory national laws in host states in that it is only conferred on the descendants of Palestine refugee males, with female refugees unable to pass on their status to their children. By contrast, the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted in 1951, includes a legal definition of refugees applied to all other displaced populations worldwide:

[A refugee is a person who] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.<sup>47</sup>

From the beginning, Palestinians were partially excluded from the Refugee Convention on the grounds that they were served by an existing UN body (in this case, UNRWA). Consequently, they were not eligible to avail themselves of the services provided by UNHCR.<sup>48</sup> Their exclusion has been especially stark since 1967, when the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees removed the Convention's original temporal and geographical restrictions, thus extending it to all nationalities – except UNRWA-registered Palestinians.<sup>49</sup>

While Palestinian exclusion from the UNHCR regime is a subject for discussion in itself,<sup>50</sup> it is worth noting that even international instruments designed specifically for the Palestinians have invoked a more comprehensive definition than that used by UNRWA. For example, in 1948, General Assembly Resolution 194 called for the implementation of return or compensation for all refugees who wished to return to their homes, regardless of whether they had lost their means of livelihood.<sup>51</sup> In 1982, the UNGA actually asked UNRWA to issue ID cards to all Palestinian refugees, regardless of their receipt of services, and thus create a full registry, but resistance from host governments rendered this impossible. UNRWA's records therefore do not and have never included the entire population of displaced Palestinians. Although UNRWA's nomenclature – “Palestine refugees” versus “Palestinian refugees” – supports a distinction between the smaller group of refugees that the agency serves, and the much larger number of Palestinian refugees globally, this distinction is not always clearly articulated in the agency's communications and policy reports. This can give the false impression that UNRWA serves the majority of Palestinian refugees.

Nevertheless, a significant number of Palestinian refugees are registered with UNRWA: currently 5.7 million of an estimated global population of eight million.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the agency has a back catalog of thousands of Palestinian refugees who registered in the past but who are no longer in need or receipt of UNRWA services.<sup>53</sup> And during periods of heightened need, such as the 1956 Suez crisis and occupation of Gaza, the 1967 war, the Lebanese war, and the first intifada, the agency has extended humanitarian aid to non-refugees.<sup>54</sup>

UNRWA's records capture these instances and shed light on the global, national, and subnational political environments within which the agency operates, and which have shaped interpretations of its largely flexible mandate.<sup>55</sup> This makes the central registry inherently valuable to anyone researching Palestinian history. Further, although UNRWA is one of the few UN agencies to support a specific national population, its status as a subsidiary agency to the UNGA means that it remains



subject to international norms and the political machinations of the post–World War II international system. UNRWA’s records thus capture both the specificities of the Palestinian issue and the agency’s particular institutional features, while also offering a valuable lens into more general phenomena, including post-war internationalism, humanitarianism, human rights, international refugee law, and development aid.

### **The Unwritten Record**

While UNRWA’s records span almost six decades, the extent of documentation differs based on the time period and host state in question (what UNRWA refers to as “fields of operation”). For example, education-related records pertaining to UNRWA’s early years (the 1950s) are sparser than the records that exist for later decades. Meanwhile, there is noticeably less documentation on refugee affairs in Syria than in other host states. Unsurprisingly, there is more documentation related to events of geopolitical significance (particularly the armed conflicts that have punctuated Palestinian exile) and in sites where UNRWA has had an expanded presence.

Accordingly, the archive contains a wealth of information related to the initial period of the Lebanese war (1975–82). For much of this period the agency’s headquarters was located in Beirut. Even after UNRWA officially relocated to Vienna, a considerable staff presence remained in the city and maintained close contacts with the PLO there. Documents from this time include monthly situation updates that recount incidents including the death of students and teachers, school closures, and damage to schools. By contrast, documentation on the latter period of the Lebanese war is much sparser. This may be because most of the agency’s non-Palestinian staff (whose perspectives and documents dominate the UNRWA archive) had left Lebanon by this time, following a period of kidnappings and killings of Palestinians and international UNRWA staff and the ousting of the PLO from Beirut in 1982. It also reflects the shifting locus of the Palestinian struggle to the West Bank and Gaza following the outbreak of the first intifada in late 1987 and the resulting expansion of UNRWA’s operations in these areas.

Assuming that the number of sources available relates to factors that influenced the creation (or not) of documents, there may be several explanations for the variability. First, given that UNRWA is a temporary agency focused on providing humanitarian aid, its staff may not have considered it necessary to ensure detailed documentation of their activities. This could be especially pertinent during the earliest years of its operations, when UNCCP was responsible for political negotiations. More generally, the agency’s humanitarian culture and the emphasis it has long placed on its “apolitical” role is at odds with the longer-term agenda of preserving and protecting the archives to support restitution for the refugees.<sup>56</sup> This may have contributed to an “act now, document later” (if at all) institutional culture.

An alternative explanation is that documents were not created because of the politically sensitive nature of UNRWA’s work. This may be especially relevant when it comes to documentation related to UNRWA’s early years. The agency’s initial remit

to develop large public works programs was a poorly veiled attempt by its Western donors to resettle the refugees through economic integration.<sup>57</sup> As a result, relations were often tense between UNRWA's senior management, the refugees, and the Arab host states that opposed these plans. Even the Jordanian government, which was amenable to UNRWA's underlying goal of resettling the refugees,<sup>58</sup> was reluctant to sign official documents with the agency. Meanwhile in Syria and Egyptian-controlled Gaza, relations between UNRWA and the respective governments and military were shrouded in distrust.<sup>59</sup> It is therefore reasonable to assume that the agency arrived at many of its activities and policies through verbal communications and informal entente, rather than officially documented processes and agreements.

A combination of these factors likely affected the creation of sources related to UNRWA's education program. UNRWA was never intended to provide education to the refugees, and this service is almost entirely absent from early blueprints for its work. Schools for refugees were first established by individual refugee teachers themselves; UNRWA eventually took charge following considerable pressure from the refugees for investment in education.<sup>60</sup> Even in the case of curriculum choices – a hotly contested and politically consequential policy for which UNRWA points to longstanding agreements with the host states – formal agreements are lacking.<sup>61</sup> Instead, the earliest acknowledgement of this policy that we identified occurs in the write-up of a conference that was convened by UNESCO in May 1952 to discuss education for the refugees.<sup>62</sup> The lack of official policy documentation may reflect the grassroots establishment of the schools. It is also suggestive of an institutional environment whereby policy emerged in response to precedents and custom, rather than by way of more centralized and formalized decision-making processes.

### **Archival Destruction and Loss**

Silencing does not only occur at the level of document creation. It also refers to preservation practices. In our research we encountered two incidents when documents related to UNRWA's history were willfully destroyed. The first occurred in early 1950, before UNRWA had begun operations, and concerned the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which provided aid to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Israel from the time of the Nakba until the onset of UNRWA's operations. In 1950, the ICRC deliberately destroyed ninety percent of the documents it had amassed during its eighteen months of operations. According to Jalal Al Hussein, it did so to reduce the cost of shipping materials from Beirut to Geneva once the organization concluded its operations in early 1950.<sup>63</sup> Of the remaining documents, a large number were handed over to UNRWA and others sent to ICRC offices in Geneva.<sup>64</sup> When compared to the wealth of documents preserved by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) who provided relief in Gaza during this same period, this incident highlights how the geographical fragmentation and decentralization of relief operations across host states impacted document preservation and, by extension, the refugee histories that can be produced based on these archives.<sup>65</sup>

The second case of document destruction occurred in 1969, when UNRWA legal officer Pascal Karmy authorized the destruction of at least forty-five files. Recording this incident in the mid-1980s, Howard Adelman found memos suggesting that these files pertained to the agency's early dealings (around 1950–56) with the Jordanian government, the establishment of an agricultural school in Gaza, and discussions with the Egyptian, Libyan, and Iraqi governments about possible resettlement schemes. Files related to UNRWA's relations with specialized UN agencies (UNESCO, the World Health Organization, and UN Children's Fund) were also considered for destruction, but it is unclear whether this was carried out.<sup>66</sup> It is therefore entirely possible that records related to the establishment of the agency's education program – including its curriculum policy – were destroyed. The loss of these historical documents for research and future refugee claims is impossible to quantify. However, the reason given by UNRWA's legal officer was that they were of no legal interest – an interpretation of UNRWA's work in keeping with the agency's humanitarian culture and apolitical self-conception long claimed by its senior management.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to the deliberate destruction of documents, UNRWA's headquarters has been moved several times, along with the central registry. When the Lebanese war broke out, UNRWA moved its headquarters and central registry from Beirut to Vienna. After the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, the agency's headquarters and central registry were moved again, this time to Amman. It is unclear whether documents were lost or destroyed as a result of these moves. However, in 1985 Adelman wrote that the agency's archives office had been hit by shelling in the Lebanese capital three years prior, resulting in the destruction of a number of documents stored there. It is reasonable to assume that at least some documents destined for the central registry were lost. Adelman himself appears to have been given a number of documents from the archive, which were subsequently stored at the Refugee Documentation Center at York University in Canada.<sup>68</sup> The fragmentation and dispersal of the agency's archives thus mirrors the experiences of Palestinians themselves. It also underscores the need for a comprehensive effort to preserve and protect the agency's sources that goes beyond the patchwork approach that has hitherto prevailed.

### **Curation, Classification, and Bias**

How are documents produced by UNRWA selected for inclusion in the central registry? The United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UNARMS), based at the UN Secretariat in New York, encourages UN agencies to follow the archiving practices and procedures they have developed. Although UNARMS can provide technical support and guidance, each UN agency sets its own archival policies and, crucially, finances them. As a result, preservation practices and the categorization of documents vary greatly across UN agencies. The financial responsibility that each agency bears for archiving materials is especially significant in view of UNRWA's precarious budget. Raising money to support the preservation of archives is likely to be a low priority for a cash-strapped agency like UNRWA. As previous incidents of

archival destruction illustrate, UNRWA's humanitarian orientation tends to skew its policy priorities toward day-to-day operational considerations, rather than the longer-term and future-oriented potential of its archives. Along with donors' tendencies to earmark their contributions for specific purposes, this orientation may prevent or dissuade the agency from diverting funds toward the preservation of the archive.

During our research, one UNRWA staff member told us that there used to be a twenty-five-year historical window for documents to be moved to the central registry. However, the specific criteria that UNRWA used to determine which documents should be archived were unclear. Within and across files it was not uncommon for us to find multiple copies of the same document. Although this provided an indication of the importance that UNRWA attached to specific decisions, programs, and events, the lack of clearly communicated criteria for archiving made it difficult to assess *why* some issues were deemed historically relevant. Indeed, many of the UNRWA staff we spoke to, including those based in Amman, were unaware of the existence of the central registry. The lack of clarity about the archive within the institution was compounded by opaque classification criteria. The documents in the central registry include strictly confidential, confidential, and non-classified documents, with classification ideally determined by the author at the point of creation. Although this leaves classification open to individual interpretation, it can still provide useful insights into the organizational culture and the significance that the agency's top decision makers attach to particular events and activities. At the same time, these categories need to be weighed against the fact that some politically sensitive matters may not have been documented at all. In these cases, silencing manifests through the failure to document the most contentious and consequential decisions and actions taken by the agency.

Researchers also need to be aware of the perspective that dominates many of the sources included in the central registry. Documents in this archive are almost always authored by, or intended for, the agency's senior management, which has been overwhelmingly dominated by men from Western Europe and North America. A crude measure of this is captured by the fact that while more than 90 percent of UNRWA's staff are Arabic-speaking Palestinians, almost all of the legal and policy-related documents in the central registry are in English. In this respect, the sources reflect the agency's internal power structure: despite being one of the most important employers of Palestine refugees in the region,<sup>69</sup> official policy is the purview of a small group of non-Palestinians.

This should not, however, be construed to mean that Palestinians lack political agency. Grassroots resistance has been a persistent feature of UNRWA's operational environment since its inception.<sup>70</sup> Reflecting this, the central registry collection includes references to Palestinian teachers who were fired from UNRWA for their political activities throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. We also came across documents authored by senior UNRWA staff that referenced Palestinian discontent with the education program, chronicled strike action by agency teachers, and called for greater provision of UNRWA aid in the camps alongside the implementation of refugees' full political rights.<sup>71</sup> While this material acknowledges the refugees' activism, it was often difficult

to ascertain how the resulting tensions were resolved by the agency: silences that could indicate any number of official or unofficial resolutions. These instances further point to the need to distinguish between UNRWA's officially articulated decisions and policies, and the ways in which these decisions are interpreted, implemented, appropriated, and transformed by agency staff and the refugee communities.

### **A Partial Archive**

As outlined above, the central registry is part of a fragmented archival landscape that documents the historical experiences of Palestinian refugees. As UNRWA is a subsidiary agency of the UN General Assembly, the UNARMS collection in New York also contains a wealth of documents relevant to the agency's history. These holdings are largely accessible to those researchers who can travel to the United States, and many of its documents, including a large number pertaining to UNRWA, have been recently digitized. The UNARMS contents include communications with UNRWA's New York-based liaison office, press releases, preparatory documents for the UNRWA commissioner-general's annual speech, and correspondence between UNRWA's directors and commissioner-generals and the UN secretary general. As such, this archive sheds light on issues of geopolitical significance and reveals how UNRWA fits into the larger post-World War II international system.

Since its establishment, UNRWA has also worked closely with other specialized UN agencies to deliver services to the refugees, principally the World Health Organization on its health program, and UNESCO on its education program. From the 1950s until the 1980s, UNESCO was heavily involved in determining the direction and structure of UNRWA's education program. For example, when the Israeli authorities complained in 1967 about the host state textbooks used in UNRWA schools, it was UNESCO and not UNRWA that set up and oversaw the work of an international committee to review all textbooks and determine their appropriateness for usage in UN-administered schools.<sup>72</sup>

UNESCO's influence and involvement in UNRWA's education program waned in the 1980s when it was defunded by the United States government, for reasons strikingly similar to the reasons given for defunding UNESCO, and arguably UNRWA, four decades later.<sup>73</sup> However, when examining the first forty years of UNRWA's operations, sources stored in UNESCO's archive in Paris can greatly enrich our understanding of UNRWA's education program and the rationale behind it. The existence of so many documents in UNESCO's archive that are relevant to UNRWA's history underscores the diffuse nature of UNRWA's operations and decision-making. Not only does the agency provide services to Palestine refugees in different national contexts, but its policies (written and unwritten) are influenced by a range of subnational, national, and global actors, each intervening on the basis of different logics and motivations. The relevance of the central registry for understanding UNRWA's impact and importance is heightened when its sources are consulted alongside the archives of other actors within this complex ecosystem.

## Archival Access Criteria and Procedures

Both of the coauthors of this article found accessing UNRWA's central registry in Amman to be a time-consuming and opaque process that required gaining the permission of the commissioner-general's office. One of us also had to acquire access permission from the specific UNRWA department she was researching (education). In keeping with UNRWA's operational focus and the political sensitivities that have long enveloped the agency, we were both advised by researchers who had previously gained access to the archive to present our research plans in as innocuous a way as possible (that is, not critical of UNRWA), in order to heighten our chances of approval. While the details of access processes varied by visit, in all cases we were broadly required to submit short descriptions of our research plans.

In an early visit in 2011, one of us was allowed to request particular files from a supplied inventory. However, all subsequent visits were much more restricted in terms of access. The standard practice involved submitting a short description of the research, on the basis of which an UNRWA archivist in Gaza would determine which files were relevant for our work. It is important to note that UNRWA's permission process contrasts with the procedures for accessing many other UN archives where researchers can communicate directly with archivists and prepare for their research using finding aids which provide an inventory of available files.

UNRWA's alternative system creates a number of limitations for researchers. Most obviously it risks denying researchers access to files that could be significant and even decisive for their research. The risk is heightened by the fact that the agency has not divulged its criteria for preserving and categorizing files, making it almost impossible for researchers to ascertain what they may be missing. In the case of education-related research, for example, files related to the agency's budget, its broader relations with host states, and personnel-related issues (for example, on teachers and UNRWA's powerful teachers' union) may all be relevant even if they have not all been sorted and explicitly tagged and filed as education-related. More generally, it was difficult to ascertain what share of UNRWA's overall documentation was related to education (that is, how well has the agency documented its administration of the schools compared to other programs?).

We also experienced changeable criteria for accessing and using the central registry over the course of our research. Between us, we visited the archive repeatedly from 2011 to 2018, and found different policies in effect on each occasion. With no archivist in place, responsibility for managing access to the collection seems to fall on various staff members tasked with this role in addition to their other duties. We were also unable to identify a standard set of policies on how the archive could be used. Regulations are inconsistent on matters such as which documents can be accessed, who determines access requirements, and whether documents can be photographed or copied. Some visits are time-limited (for example, a maximum of ten days) and supervised; others are flexible and unattended.

On one occasion in 2016, one of us was granted permission to access the archive and scan relevant documents. By the time she arrived in the archive several months later, the policy had changed: scanning was no longer permitted but photocopying documents was allowed. These policy shifts were not communicated ahead of time, and often implied that additional resources (financial and time) would be required, resulting in a scramble to manage different procedures within the time frames allotted to undertake the research in Amman.

Although restricting access to archives can be justified in terms of protecting and preserving valuable documents, UNRWA's policies appeared to be driven by other considerations. Indeed, the condition of the archive suggests that its preservation is not a priority concern of the agency. The central registry is kept in a dank basement in the Amman headquarters complex. While documents are filed into the usual archival cardboard boxes, many of these boxes are falling apart. One of us witnessed a box that literally fell apart when staff tried to move it. Another of us opened a box to find several dead cockroaches inside. Nor were there policies about consuming food and drink around the files: on several occasions one of us was offered coffee and tea while reviewing the documents. Instead, the recommendation that we present our research as innocuously as possible and the fact that previous researchers have been provided with more expansive access to the central registry suggests that access is subject to the vagaries of the political climate within which UNRWA operates. This obviously runs counter to the goals of much independent research, especially that which seeks to advance understanding of Palestinian history and UNRWA's role, by promoting well-evidenced critical reflection about the agency's work.

## **Archival Meanings: UNRWA's Complexities and Contradictions**

Scholarship from the field of critical archive studies underscores the politically consequential nature of archives. Decisions about which sources are included in an archive, how they are classified, and the conditions under which they can be accessed, shape in turn the research that is conducted and the outputs produced. These decisions inform how we understand the historical significance of particular events, and the connections that we draw between the past, present, and future. The political relevance of archiving is especially pronounced when exploring histories of social injustice and questions concerning subaltern populations, since the documentation of these experiences can facilitate restitution claims. The Palestinian Question is a case in point. As the largest repository of documentation concerning UNRWA's activities, the central registry's structure, policies, and practices are unavoidably politically significant. A better understanding of the intent and impact of the agency's archival policies can therefore illuminate the role that UNRWA has played for generations of Palestinian refugees. With this in mind, we discuss in this closing section how the varied forms of silencing described above relate to Fricker's conception of epistemic in/justice.

The factors that have shaped the creation and curation of UNRWA's central registry highlight the ways in which the archive may explicitly or inadvertently reproduce structural and testimonial biases. In the first instance, the agency's narrow definition of a refugee means that the documents kept in its archive reflect the agency's interactions with the subgroup of Palestinian refugees who receive its services. In other words, research that draws on the archive should not be considered comprehensive of the Palestinian refugee experience. Instead, the archive provides a lens into the ways in which an internationally oriented aid program has shaped the lives of refugees whose experiences of displacement and dispossession in 1948 resulted in their registration with UNRWA. Further, since UNRWA's definition applies only to the children of male refugees, it excludes the descendants of those female refugees who registered with the agency but married non-refugees. Thus, from the outset the central registry offers a selective lens onto Palestinian refugee experiences.

Hermeneutical injustices also stem from the destruction and loss of historical records, and the absence of any clear communication of archiving policies and practices, including the criteria for curating and classifying documents in the registry. As previously described, our experiences of working there revealed highly changeable and opaque policies and procedures. It is important to note that these policies and procedures can be especially difficult for Palestinian and other Global South researchers to navigate, since they often necessitate flexibility in travel plans and even last-minute changes to travel that are difficult if not impossible to accommodate when traveling on visas.

These forms of silencing limit researchers' ability to understand the decisions UNRWA has made on behalf of the refugees, and how they have created institutional path dependencies that continue to affect the lives of millions of refugees. These silences, however, are also revealing. Notably, they speak to an organizational culture that is often at odds with the preservation of institutional memory and the future restitution claims that this can facilitate. Specifically, the archive reflects UNRWA's humanitarian orientation, which projects a temporary and apolitical view of the agency's role. Accordingly, biases are not necessarily the result of deliberate or intentional choices on the part of the agency. They often appear to be a consequence of the low prioritization accorded to the archive in the face of pressing operational considerations. This reflects the incomplete nature of the international regime that exists for Palestinian refugees which, since the demise of UNCCP, has been dominated by an ostensibly apolitical and humanitarian approach, limiting meaningful multilateral involvement in political processes that concern the refugees' future. Nevertheless, UNRWA does benefit from a somewhat flexible mandate.<sup>74</sup> As such, there is considerable potential for its archive to contribute to these processes should its senior management so choose.

More broadly, the fact that the central registry is split across national contexts,



has been transported to a new venue multiple times, and comprises only one (albeit important) set of historical documents pertaining to UNRWA's operations, speaks to both the multiple forms of fragmentation that have shaped Palestinian exile and the incomplete nature of UNRWA's support to the refugees. The relevance of archival silencing for understanding Palestinian refugee history is all the more apparent when we consider the different forms of testimonial injustice present in the central registry. The underrepresentation of refugee voices in the archive and the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a small and predominantly non-Palestinian cadre of senior management, is suggestive of a neo-colonial institutional set-up. This points to a decidedly undemocratic model of governance vis-à-vis the agency's main constituents: Palestine refugees. It also contrasts with accusations that the agency is biased toward Palestinians – and poses a challenge to UNRWA's own claim that it is a neutral actor on the question of Palestine.<sup>75</sup>

The hermeneutical and testimonial injustices that surround the central registry thus shed light on the seemingly simple but disarmingly complex question of what UNRWA is – and by extension, the role it plays in relation to the question of Palestine. As Randa Farah has argued, UNRWA is neither fixed nor homogenous.<sup>76</sup> Whereas outwardly the agency presents an image of continuity, the patchwork of documents included in the central registry reveal that it is fraught with tensions arising from local and regional entanglements and geopolitics. These tensions underscore the opposing influences exerted on the agency and speak to the contradictions inherent in its quasi-state status. Much like a state, UNRWA's decision-making is shaped by the interests of an array of political constituents. However, its set-up – mandated by the UNGA and reliant on external funding – means that these constituents rarely prioritize the perspectives of the very people they are meant to serve: Palestine refugees themselves. The complexities, contradictions, and silences of the central registry reflect this paradox. As such, it not only mirrors the dispersals and fragmentations of Palestinian refugee experiences, but also speaks to the broader political consequence of archives in determining which histories are recorded, validated, excluded, and silenced.

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