

HISTORY WORKSHOP IN TURBULENT TIMES

Rescuing the UNRWA Archive: Saving Palestinian History amidst the Gaza Genocide

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In October 2023 a small team of Palestinian staff working for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) drove from south to north Gaza. It was an exceedingly dangerous journey. North Gaza, where the UNRWA headquarters were located in Gaza City, was under an Israeli military evacuation order.¹ Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had been forcibly displaced from the region, which was under constant bombardment by the Israeli military. In driving north, the aid workers were moving in the opposite direction to most of the Strip's population. But what makes the workers' journey all the more remarkable is its purpose: rescuing an archive.

The UNRWA staffers drove back and forth three times between the southern town of Rafah – where the agency had temporarily relocated – and its evacuated headquarters in Gaza City. At the latter, they loaded more than 200 boxes of archival documents into three UN trucks, later unloading them at a food storage depot in Rafah. The boxes contained the original registration records for approximately 200,000 Palestinians who were made refugees during the 1948 war (known to Palestinians as the Nakba or 'catastrophe'), as well as hundreds of thousands of others who were born into exile in Gaza in the decades that followed.² The staffers were not just saving historical documents. They were preserving invaluable evidence of Palestinian life before and after Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948.³

Following the Hamas-led attacks of 7 October 2023, in which 1,195 Israelis were killed and 251 captured, the state of Israel unleashed a devastating war on Gaza.⁴ At the time of writing in July 2025, Israel has killed at least 60,000 Palestinians in a war now widely recognized as genocidal.⁵ While much of the resulting commentary has highlighted the unprecedented ferocity and scale of Israel's current war on Gaza, some historians have also pointed out the longer-term dynamics at play, situating it within the decades of displacement, violence and occupation that Palestinians have suffered at the hands of the Israeli state.⁶ In this article, we address another historically-relevant dimension of the war on Gaza: the danger posed to Palestinian historical memory by the military

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destruction of historical artefacts and institutions in the Strip.⁷ We focus in particular on the fate of UNRWA's archives, whose partial salvage provides a rare positive example of a successful rescue mission during the recent – and, at the time of writing, ongoing – genocidal war.

To understand the significance of the UNRWA archival rescue in Gaza, it is necessary to first consider the role of the agency itself in Palestinian and wider regional history. Created by a UN resolution at the end of 1949, UNRWA provided an international response to the Palestinian refugee crisis engendered by the creation of the state of Israel the previous year. To establish a Jewish state in Palestine, Zionist militias and the Israeli national army had carried out the large-scale expulsion and displacement of the Palestinian people, forcing at least 750,000 into exile over 1947–49, in events later described as the Nakba.⁸ When UNRWA began operations in May 1950, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees were surviving in dire conditions across the Levant.

UNRWA provided essential relief services in the areas where it was mandated to work: Gaza, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Lebanon, Jordan and Syria – known collectively as the 'five fields'. (It also provided services to refugees inside Israel, 17,000 of whom were Jewish, until the Israeli government requested that it cease doing so in 1952).⁹ As the years passed and it became clear that the Palestinian refugee crisis would not be resolved imminently, UNRWA's operations increasingly moved into the sphere of service provision, with the agency running large-scale health and education programmes across the five fields. As a result, it was sometimes described as a 'quasi-state' for the stateless Palestinians.¹⁰

With its work virtually contemporaneous with the Palestinian refugee crisis, UNRWA's archive provides a crucial record of Palestinian national history across both time and space. This is especially important in view of the Palestinian people's long-term statelessness, which has prevented the establishment of a unified national archive in Palestine – notwithstanding important initiatives in Ramallah and Beirut, and grassroots community collections in various spaces.¹¹ In such a context, the UNRWA records may be understood as the closest thing to a Palestinian national archive that currently exists, encompassing refugee community histories from the early aftermath of the Nakba and across much of the Levant.¹²

UNRWA's archival collections are even more important given the long history of Zionist-Israeli erasure of Palestinian history and heritage, including the theft, looting and destruction of private archives by Zionist militias across historic Palestine during the Nakba, the theft of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) archives and collections in Lebanon by the Israeli military during the occupation of 1982, and the destruction of Palestinian records and heritage that has accompanied Israeli military violence across the West Bank and Gaza since it began occupying these territories in 1967.¹³ Accordingly, the fate of the UNRWA archive is embedded in questions about Palestinian heritage, institutional memory, survival, and legal claims, as well as broader themes around the politics of history and erasure, especially during war.¹⁴

In this article, we discuss the wider significance of military threats to UNRWA's archival collections in Gaza, alongside agency staff's moves to rescue the archive by transferring it out of the Strip in the middle of continuing genocidal warfare. We also look at the efforts to preserve this archive and make it accessible for future generations of Palestinians. In the process, we probe how military threats to archives – and the attached threats to history and collective memory – intersect with other forms of physical and cultural destruction in warfare. We consider documentary salvage within the wider spectrum of non-violent resistance to settler colonialism. And we ultimately engage with underlying theoretical questions about the politics and meaning of archival collections: who owns history and the documents that represent it in the form of an archive; and what wider meanings are attached to the physical preservation and survival of an archival collection?

UNRWA'S ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS: AN OVERVIEW

The holdings of the UNRWA archive contain an array of files and visual materials: registers, reports, correspondence, photographs, videos, memoranda and budgetary information. First, there is UNRWA's photo and film archive, which includes more than 430,000 negatives, 10,000 prints, 85,000 slides, 75 films and 730 videocassettes. This holding is among the best preserved of the agency's collections, with much of it digitized. Since 2009 it has been inscribed by UNESCO in the Memory of The World list. Some of this material has already been made accessible to the general public via UNRWA's website.¹⁵

The second holding is UNRWA's Organizational Archives (previously known as its Central Registry). This includes documents created and/or archived by UNRWA, which contain demographic and administrative data regarding the refugees, agency staff communications (internal and external) as well as the voices, experiences and contestations of Palestinian refugees since the early aftermath of the Nakba. As such, these holdings convey different facets of Palestinian history since the Nakba. In the late 1970s, when the agency controversially moved its headquarters from Beirut to escape the Lebanese civil war, a large part of this archival holding was relocated to Vienna.¹⁶ After Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords in the mid-1990s, the Organizational Archive was split into two main collections: documents covering the years up to 1992, and those from the post-1992 period. UNRWA opted to store the post-1992 records in Gaza, in a decision that reflected the political realities of the time: in the 1990s, the Strip was the location of the newly-created Palestinian Authority (PA)'s headquarters, and UNRWA moved its own headquarters there at a point when it envisioned an eventual handover to the PA upon the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

In the event, of course, the Oslo set-up turned out to be a huge disappointment for the Palestinians. Rather than independent statehood, they endured further loss of land, as Israel continued to expand its settlements and seize more land in both Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁷ In 2004, Israel's heavy bombardment of Gaza City during the second intifada (Palestinian uprising) led UNRWA to relocate its

headquarters to East Jerusalem and Amman, but it continued to store the post-1992 files in Gaza. Since 2007, the Israeli blockade of Gaza has cut off access to this part of the archive from most of the world – including, crucially, the majority of the Palestinian people, whose history it concerns.

UNRWA's third major archival holding is its registration documentation. These files record demographic data about the refugees, alongside information pertaining to their eligibility to receive the agency's services. Given the importance of the registration documents in evidencing the refugees' legal status, their eligibility for UNRWA services and any possible future compensation claims, it is worth briefly elaborating here on the development and content of these files, which, like the refugees themselves, span multiple generations.

The first generation of these documents is the registration cards that UNRWA inherited from its predecessor agency, UN Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR), which had functioned as an umbrella body that delivered services through the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Gaza and the Red Cross in the other four fields.¹⁸ When UNRWA began work in 1950, a second generation of registration files (also referred to as the UNRWA Master Cards) was created. These resembled the cards that UNRWA had inherited from UNRPR. However, the Master Cards were based on UNRWA's determination of refugee eligibility for agency services (since UNRWA used an operational definition) and accordingly included some additional information not contained in the UNRPR files. The Master Cards also recorded changes to family status, including the registration of children born in exile, in accordance with international law and consistent with policy across the global refugee regime. A third generation of documents covers the period 1958–95, after UNRWA introduced a system whereby a separate index card was created for each individual family member. The registration process was also standardized at this time: a code number was created to allow agency staff to trace family connections, and additional documentary evidence of changes in family status had to be submitted to the agency.¹⁹

Computerization of refugee registration files started in 1979. Copies of the registration documents were sent to and stored in the agency's headquarters, located at the time in Vienna. In the early 2000s, UNRWA created a field registration database (the fourth generation), which was updated to a web-based refugee registration information system in 2010 (the fifth generation). Most recently (in 2022) a mobile platform (e-UNRWA) was developed to streamline the registration process. This platform is integrated with the refugee registration information system and digital archive. As more of UNRWA's archive is digitized, it will be possible to link current refugee files to those of their ancestors.²⁰ While UNRWA maintains separate information systems for other services (health, education, social safety and emergency assistance) the refugee registration number serves as a unique common identifier.

UNRWA's registration documentation is vitally important not only because it determines eligibility for UNRWA services but also because it provides tangible evidence of the Nakba's scale and scope. As such it may be used to

support future efforts at truth, reconciliation and compensation for Palestinian losses.²¹ But as of October 2023, only two-thirds of the registration files created before 2010 had been digitized and none of the scanned documents were systematically classified.²² In other words, hundreds of thousands of historical records existed only in paper form in each of UNRWA's five fields – including the Gaza Strip, which was about to endure near-total annihilation at the hands of the Israeli military.

It is worth noting that from the outset, UNRWA's registration process and associated documentation was beset by challenges and mistrust from Israel, the Arab host state governments (meaning Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, as well as Egypt in its guise as the administering power in Gaza until 1967), and the Palestinian refugees themselves. As a subsidiary agency of the United Nations – the same organization that had advocated the partition of Palestine in 1947²³ – UNRWA faced considerable suspicion from Palestinian and other Arab actors. This was exacerbated by overt American involvement in UNRWA's affairs, often exercised via its financial leverage. Not only did the US government heavily influence UNRWA's initial purpose as a job creation programme (hence the 'works' in its title), intended to entice the refugees into giving up on their right of return, but it also pressured the agency to reduce the number of registered refugees for several decades after UNRWA's establishment. Meanwhile the Israeli state, whose founding myths included a denial of the Nakba and its associated ethnic cleansing, viewed UNRWA's registration process as an existential hazard, culminating in an antipathy towards the agency that has grown over time. This hostility co-existed uneasily with a tacit Israeli recognition that UNRWA's works ultimately served its interests, by providing services in the West Bank and Gaza that would otherwise have been the obligation of the Israeli occupying power after 1967.²⁴ Consequently, UNRWA's holdings and any efforts to change its registration processes or criteria have always been loaded and deeply politicized.

Making matters worse still, UNRWA has long operated with a serious financial deficit, and its budgetary constraints have only worsened in recent years. As a result, its ability to systematize, digitize and make its archival holdings more accessible has been hampered by limited resources alongside the complications of a contested political landscape and the fragmentation that structures the Palestinian experience.²⁵ At the start of the 2023 war on Gaza, UNRWA's archives were scattered across its five areas of operation – an arrangement that had persisted even though Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini stated in 2021 that 'four of the five fields are in severe crisis'.²⁶ Indeed, it is worth noting that even before October 2023, Palestinian refugee communities across the Levant were living through protracted emergencies, with long-term Israeli occupation and militarized violence in the West Bank and Gaza since 1967, an ongoing political and economic crisis in Lebanon since 2019, and a devastating war with mass displacement in Syria since 2011.

RESCUING THE GAZA ARCHIVE

Within the first month of the war on Gaza, Israel had killed more than 10,000 Palestinians.²⁷ At the time of writing in July 2025, that number has surpassed 60,000 – a figure that is likely to be a significant underestimate.²⁸ The reports and images coming out of Gaza also bear witness to the massive destruction of infrastructure, homes and arable land – material and environmental losses which greatly undermine the sustainability of life in the Strip. Although UNRWA's holdings in Gaza had survived sixteen years of Israeli blockade, intensive Israeli bombardments in 2008–9, 2012, 2014 and 2021, and the constant lower-level violence that has regularly killed Palestinians in the Strip, UNRWA staff quickly recognized that this totalistic war posed a serious threat to the agency's archive and all it represented.

Their fears were far from unfounded. Early in the war, UNRWA's main archivist in Gaza was killed – one in a death toll of more than 320 UNRWA staff in what has proved the deadliest war ever for UN aid workers.²⁹ At the time of writing, Israeli bombardment has also damaged more than 300 UNRWA installations in Gaza, including schools, health centres and food depots that were sheltering displaced families.³⁰ In October 2023, the post-1992 files that formed part of the Organizational Archives were destroyed when an Israeli airstrike damaged the UNRWA compound and fire broke out. Combined with Israel's persistent violations of UN immunities – something that was also a feature of Israeli conduct in previous attacks on Gaza³¹ – concerns grew about the fate of the rest of the agency's archives in the Strip.

The issue was especially loaded because Israel's war on Gaza involved not only the mass killing of the Palestinian population, but the large-scale destruction of their history and heritage. As the Israeli military razed libraries, educational institutions, museums, public records offices and more, numerous Palestinians and international observers came to speak of *cultural genocide* in the Strip.³² It is worth noting that Raphael Lemkin, the jurist who originally coined the term *genocide* in the 1940s, explicitly identified this kind of cultural destruction ('prohibiting or destroying cultural institutions and cultural activities') as one element of the crime of genocide. He characterized the latter as 'a synchronized attack on different aspects of life of the captive peoples' – in other words, as a crime involving political, social, cultural and economic attacks alongside mass killings.³³ During the original Nakba of 1948 and in its aftermath, Zionist militias and the Israeli state had worked to erase evidence of the Palestinian people's presence and their connection to the land.³⁴ From October 2023, the Israeli military was doing the same in Gaza. In such a setting, the UNRWA archive – with its written documentation of decades of Palestinian history in Palestine – gained an added importance.

Keenly aware of all of this, some UNRWA staff were quick to act in 2023, culminating in the rescue mission described at the outset of this article. But the transfer of the registration files from Gaza City to Rafah was only the first stage of a complex rescue operation. With Israeli forces ravaging the entire Strip, and long threatening a ground invasion of Rafah (which they ultimately launched in

May 2024), it was clear that nowhere in Gaza was safe. Still, transporting the collection out of the Strip seemed impossible; Israel's stringent blockade meant that even essential items were not getting in or out.

Compounding the problem even further, the relationship between UNRWA and the Israeli authorities was at an all-time low. Even before October 2023, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies had spent years denigrating the agency and calling for its dissolution.³⁵ With the Israeli government openly disparaging UNRWA as a perceived hostile entity, there was no hope of a formal agreement for the archival collection's safe passage out of Gaza. Moreover, since any trucks leaving Gaza need to exit via the Israeli-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing (Karem Abu Salem in Arabic), any attempt to transport the registration documents in bulk without prior clearance would risk Israeli seizure and appropriation, with no digital backup in place. The refusal of the Egyptian authorities to allow the documents to be transported through their territory unless there was prior coordination and approval from the Israeli authorities complicated the rescue attempt still more.³⁶

With so few options, the UNRWA workers landed on a workable approach that was piecemeal, prolonged – and successful. Over a period of several months in late 2023 and early 2024, UNRWA's international staff, who were able to enter and leave the Strip, carried a handful of documents in their luggage each time they exited Gaza via the Rafah pedestrian crossing into Egypt. The cross-border operation required a great deal of care; staff were striving to rescue crucial documentary evidence while surviving a genocide themselves. The time-consuming and high-risk process ultimately worked; UNRWA workers eventually managed to transfer the files out of Gaza into Egypt. The rescue was completed mere days before the Israeli military invaded Rafah in May 2024. After it was collated across the border in Sinai, the collection was airlifted to Jordan.³⁷

UNRWA has since turned to the digitization of the files rescued from Gaza, along with others.³⁸ In 2022 the agency had embarked on a pilot project to digitize a limited number of registration documents, covering ten villages in historic (pre-1948) Palestine. This initiative engaged Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, providing them with training to scan, review, and classify documents and reconstruct family trees within the refugee registration information system. In this way it also gave a small number of refugees the opportunity to learn more about their national and family histories.³⁹ This pilot project can be expanded to support the preservation of those files that have not been digitized.

Other future possibilities include connecting UNRWA's registration files to the records of the United Nations Conciliation Council for Palestine (UNCCP). The latter's records complement UNRWA's registry by detailing the property losses and damages experienced by Palestinian families between 1947 and 1949, although they have been closed to researchers for much of the last two decades.⁴⁰ Harmonizing and synchronizing these two archives would be essential for Palestinian refugees' pursuit of legal claims against the state of Israel – and arguably other actors – since the start of the Nakba.

But as UNRWA looks to expand its digitization work, including additional preservation efforts and making accessible the family files rescued from Gaza, it is faced with a number of challenges. Since 2018, when the first Trump administration defunded UNRWA, the agency has struggled to stay solvent. As important as the files are, funding for this endeavour must compete with the urgent need to provide basic essential services to millions of registered refugees across a crisis-ridden region. Whether or not wealthy donor states – many of which are abandoning rather than supporting the agency during this time of extreme need – are willing to fund the ongoing archival work remains to be seen.

A related consideration is timing. UNRWA staff estimate that it will take up to three years to digitize, trace and connect all the family files within the registration system. Not only are few donors willing to provide such sustained funding, but the precarious context within which the agency finds itself also makes planning ahead extremely difficult. Although Artificial Intelligence has the potential to greatly facilitate this process, this needs to be weighed against data protection concerns and the huge costs that AI systems can entail.

Digitization also comes with its own risks. Since October 2023, UNRWA has experienced numerous cyber attacks, some of which have disrupted its refugee registration system and online donation page. To guard against the loss of data, UNRWA took the registration system offline for a month and made important security upgrades. The system is now back online and a dedicated IT security team works to fend off the frequent cyber attacks. Nevertheless, the cyber attacks raise important concerns regarding the attempts to discredit and undermine UNRWA's registration system. Although these concerns are not new, since October 2023 they have taken on an added urgency as UNRWA has become the subject of near constant disinformation by the Israeli government and its supporters.⁴¹

For Palestinians who have been displaced and disconnected from each other, including across impassable borders, greater access to the registration documents has the potential to reconstruct fragmented communities and families (even if only virtually). But this work must also be carefully managed. Not only can genealogical work pose legal and moral dilemmas, but reconstituting family trees for people who have long been forcibly separated from each other requires care, not least in the shadow of this war on Gaza during which Israel has killed so many families. The process must always centre the concerns and priorities of the Palestinian people themselves, who have so often been relegated to the margins of their own historical narrative.⁴²

THE POLITICS OF PRESERVATION

Throughout this war, the UNRWA archive has been located at the nexus of two phenomena: *cultural genocide* and *attacks on UNRWA*. The former involves the large-scale destruction of Palestinian heritage sites, libraries, educational institutions, museums, and more. The latter includes the unprecedented level of physical attacks on UNRWA's staff and infrastructure as well as political campaigns against its mandate, operations and reputation. All this culminated

in the Knesset (Israeli parliament) voting to ban UNRWA in October 2024 and many western governments choosing to cut their funding to the agency, with full budgetary defunding by the US Congress in March 2024.

Although the extent of Israel's attacks on UNRWA during this war far surpasses anything the agency has previously experienced, Israel's efforts to erase Palestinian national history are not new. Long-term tactics include the promulgation of narratives that deny or grossly underplay Palestinian presence in their historic homeland as well as the events that led to their displacement, the physical razing of depopulated Palestinian communities, the de-Arabization and Judaization of place names, and the widespread and organized destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage.⁴³ It is no exaggeration to say that the establishment of Israel as an exclusive (and exclusionary) state for Jewish people was in large part predicated on historical erasure.

As Palestinians have long contended, the Nakba did not end in 1948.⁴⁴ Historicide has continued to play a defining and enabling role in Israel's ongoing dispossession of the Palestinian people. Since 1950, UNRWA has served as not only an aid agency, but an important witness and rapporteur of the ongoing Nakba. Its family files provide crucial historical evidence of the enormity of human and material losses suffered by the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli state. Its Organizational Archive also offers a lens into the bureaucratic politics and decision making that has shaped the lives of millions of Palestinian refugees in the eight decades since. As such, UNRWA's records provide a glimmer of hope for future accountability. It is this dual role of the agency, as both a provider of aid and an international witness, that have made it – and its records – a prime target of the current Israeli government.

It is highly unlikely that the registration documents in Gaza would have survived this genocidal war intact without the resourceful and courageous efforts of the agency's staff. Their heroic efforts to save the files attest to Palestinians' appreciation of the significance of UNRWA's documentation and their associated drive to resist the historical erasure that underpins so much of their dispossession. At the same time, the challenges the agency now faces in where to store these rescued archives, how best to preserve and make them accessible, and how to manage the myriad risks that archiving in the Palestinian context poses to individuals and the institution, speak to the legacies of historical erasure and related political sensitivities that continue to overshadow UNRWA's historical records and their potential uses.

The destruction of historical records is of course not unique to the context of Palestine-Israel. In the last few years alone, archives in Ukraine, Syria and the United States have been threatened, damaged and, in some cases, intentionally destroyed during major political upheavals.⁴⁵ From this perspective, the destruction – and rescue – of UNRWA's archives in Gaza can be understood as part of a broader emergent struggle over the present and future of post-war liberal internationalism. And to the extent that history is one of the forgotten victims of this struggle, individual and institutional acts of historical preservation can also serve as an important tool of resistance.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

To protect the safety of individuals and guard against the extreme risk of retaliation, we are not revealing here any details about the staff who carried out this rescue mission. We are grateful to the relevant UNRWA team for their kind cooperation in researching this article.

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ABSTRACT

Israel's genocide in Gaza has entailed extensive attacks on Palestinian heritage and history, including institutional archives which preserve historical documents, like that of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). In this article, we trace how a small team of UNRWA staff successfully resisted these attacks by rescuing the agency's archival materials and transferring them out of Gaza. We situate their efforts within the decades-long context of Palestinian resistance against Israeli erasure of their national history. In the process, we also engage with broader questions about the meaning, ownership, and preservation of archival collections.

Keywords: Palestine, history, UNRWA, archive, Gaza, refugees