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The Whitewashing of History in a Time of Genocide

التعتيم على التاريخ الفلسطيني في فلسطين

This summer, I led a series of workshops at Hebron University in al-Khalil (Hebron), Palestine, on the use of Ottoman archival records in the writing of Palestinian history.

My time in al-Khalil during an active genocide against Palestinians left me wondering if there is a role for historical education to play in Palestine in understanding colonialism, dispossession, and the violence of occupation. Anybody who has spent time in the West Bank knows that the unrelenting violence of occupation and ethnic cleansing are part of the grinding daily lived experience of every single Palestinian, from the day they are born. This violence shows up in a myriad of ways: Whether it is growing up in a household where one or more members of your family are disappeared, the sting of fractured ribs from rubber bullets hidden under your well-pressed school uniform, the smell of pepper gas and the sounds of stun grenades when the Israeli military raids your school, the house demolitions in your neighbourhood, the inability to predict how long a ride to school could take because of the arbitrary road closures, the salaries of your parents who work in the public sector which are almost never paid in full under orders from the Israeli government to ensure there is no ability to plan for the near or distant future or meet the needs of daily life, the heartbreak of not being allowed to access your farmland, your house, or even family members because of Israeli governments' blockades, walls, occupation, or violence by illegal settlers who live sometimes as close as across the street from you.

So, you can imagine my surprise when I learned that the history of this ongoing form of colonial violence was being whitewashed in history books, even in the West Bank.

When I first arrived at Hebron University, I had hoped that I would be able to read some of the Ottoman language documents with the attendees. However, since most attendees did not know Turkish, reading Ottoman documents together proved challenging, and I began to feel like I was losing the audience. For the second session, I dug deep into some of the records that I have collected over the years to find examples of documents that would be of interest to local graduate students and academics. A couple of the documents I had procured dealt with Theodor Herzl's attempts at bribing the Ottoman palace and their rejection of his offer.

When I announced that after the break, we would be reading some correspondence between Herzl and the Ottoman government, some people in the audience looked at me with blank expressions on their faces. I was unsure if I was pronouncing it correctly. I was lecturing in Arabic, after all, and was using the English pronunciation of his name. So, I paused and decided to say "Herzl" as it was written in Ottoman-Turkish. So, I repeated it with more drama, "Herchel!" Same stares. What was I missing?

—Finally, one among the audience broke the silence with: "Who is Herzl?"

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I was not prepared for this question. A question about Herzl, the founder of the Zionist project and, arguably, the single man whose advocacy of settler colonialism in Palestine has turned the lives of Palestinians upside down, with increasingly violent consequences that continue until today! So, how was it that Herzl was not a household name? I was not sure what to say. I looked around at the older faces in the audience for reassurance. During the break, the older faculty members in the audience assured me that this is just the historical ignorance that many in the younger generation of Palestinians in the West Bank suffer from these days.

However, that was not reassuring at all.

In a later conversation with two colleagues – a retired historian who participated in the writing of the current official history curriculum for high schools in the West Bank and a scholar of modern Palestinian history and literature – they explained to me what happened. After the Oslo Accord, the EU-funded official social science and humanities curriculum in Palestinian schools had to meet strict censorship oversight, which required the downplaying of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, Zionism as a settler colonial ideology, and even the history of resistance to the ongoing occupation, with long-term consequences: a generation that does not understand the history of the colonial violence they have to contend with.

A carefully curated, and at times whitewashed, telling of the history of Israel and Palestine is not unique to the Occupied Territories, as those of us who teach the history of the modern Middle East in American universities know all too well. We often get students whose only knowledge of the history of Israel and Palestine is limited to what family members, religious schools, and the biased US media have told them.

So, my surprise was not due to the young people's ignorance of the history of Zionism and its settler colonial manifestation. Perhaps nobody knows its impact better than they do, whether they have heard of Herzl or not. In fact, none of these lived realities are ones that we can ever teach effectively in the US.

My surprise was about the level of investment by the government in Israel and the West Bank, supported by Western governments and institutions, to erase, rewrite, or simply withhold the history of this violence from their populations, with long-term consequences such as the one I witnessed. This way, colonialism and occupation in Palestine are rendered ahistorical, with no beginning and thus no hope for an end, suspended in time and space as if natural facts of life. The relationship of subjugation, occupation, and the experience of threat to life and livelihood become normalized. A historically contingent political ideology like Zionism, and its relatively recent history become mythical and almost untouchable. Any relief, regardless of how small it is, from being let through a checkpoint, to the release of a parent who was arbitrarily detained and disappeared, become acts of divine intervention, and not part of a historically contingent, man-made injustice that has played out in Palestine for almost a century.

This form of erasure tracks with the recorded bombing of the locations housing archives and libraries, and the pillaging archeological sites from Gaza to al-Khalil by Israeli, American, and European archeologists. Historical records, above and below the ground, are put in service of affirming a singular narrative which supports the violent dispossession of an indigenous people and severs their deep roots to the land.

The gatekeeping of historical records and the control of the resources needed to conduct research, write, teach, and make widely accessible are part of a silent war on Palestinians and Palestinian-ness. My time in al-Khalil forced me to connect the dots. Why else does the website of the Israeli national archives block Palestinian scholars in the West Bank from accessing it? Why do major EU-funded research projects such as the one by Germany on the history of "Ottoman Palestinians" of Gaza and al-Khalil collaborate with Israeli universities, and not have a single Palestinian student (from the diaspora or Palestine) on their

roster of researchers and research assistants? Why are books on Palestinian history confiscated by the Israeli border guards when entering the West Bank? Why are so many Western scholars with the resources to study and teach the history of Palestinians silent about this erasure, especially in light of the ongoing genocide in Gaza?

For those of us who care about Palestinians and the study of history, and understand the danger of its erasure, what are we to do?

Scholars, particularly scholars who work on Southwest Asia, we must: 1) include Palestinian scholars and students in our research; 2) devise ways to teach historical research methodology and historiography to Palestinian students; 3) find the financial resources necessary to give Palestinian students access to learning Ottoman-Turkish and other languages of archives that are accessible to them; 4) call out the gatekeeping of resources and erasure of history by facilitating historical research and the teaching of history **in Palestine, by Palestinians, for Palestinians.**

We cannot control the barriers that the Israeli government and its allies in Western universities put up. However, that should not deter us. What I have learned during my short time in al-Khalil is the importance of continuing to try, even if the results are incremental and the impact is temporary.