

HI3H7 Foreign Bodies, Contagious Communities: Migration in the Modern World

Applied Assessment/Blog

1940/2000 words

The Forgotten Refugee: Palestinian women in the Nakba (1948) and beyond



Displaced Palestinian woman in Ein El Sultan refugee camp, 1950.
ICRC Archives, Palestine Collection “Jéricho. Abri de réfugiés arabes d'Ein Sultan” March, 1950 accessed at [<https://avarchives.icrc.org/>] Feb, 10, 2022

“To be a refugee is hard, but to be a woman and a refugee is the hardest of all”- [Manor Faraj](#). A '[Palestinian refugee](#)' is defined as a person whose normal residence was Palestine from June 1 1946 to May 15 1948, and who lost both their home and means of livelihood. This is the reality for many Palestinian people today living as refugees in foreign countries or second-class citizens in a settler colonial and apartheid state. More than 5.6 Palestinian refugees were registered under the UN as of 2019.

The Israel and Palestinian conflict is highly contested and debated on our university campuses. We engaged in debates about the conflict and even witnessed student protests take place on our university

campuses. However, we have seldom truly dived into the *human experience* of living under a regime that disguises itself as liberal and free. The fear, agony, and loss of hope that Palestinians experience daily is rarely understood by the regular British public, let alone University Students.

What is more interesting is our negligence of Palestinian women's experiences as refugees and as citizens living in occupied regions in Palestine. While we have adopted a feminist and post-colonial understanding of most modern conflicts, we have mostly viewed Arab refugees like Palestinian women as a statistic. What is life like for Palestinian women under the occupation? How have Palestinian women contributed to the resistance movements throughout the conflict's discourse? What was it like for Palestinian women to lose their homes and be displaced?

Let me take you on a journey to untangle these questions. Let us start with the story of "Um Raid"...

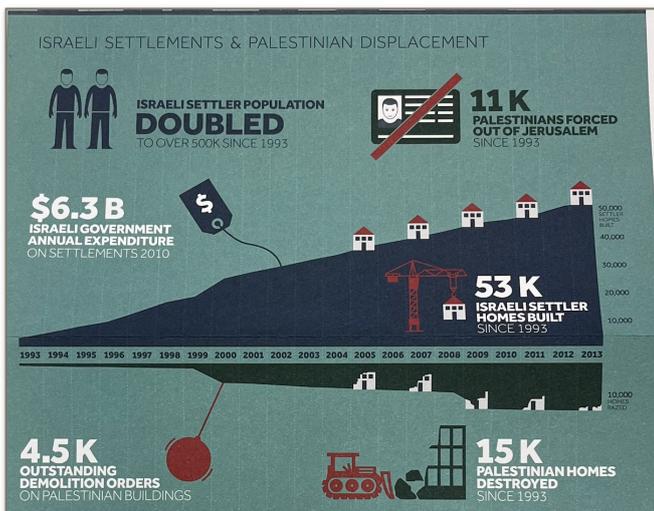
Fahimah, or "Um Raid", sat in her half-destroyed balcony in the Jenin Refugee in the West bank in 2002. She spoke to another Palestinian woman, Nadeerah, who was interviewing Palestinian female refugees, [whose work I draw upon](#) frequently. "Katuluna bidoon rah me" she told Nadeerah, which translates to "*They killed us without mercy.....we were tortured, humiliated and invaded*". Um Raid's last sentence to Nadeerah truly gave me shivers: "In their crimes, they strengthened our history... with our resilience, we will build our future: let me finish cooking for those who are still with us."

Um Raid is just one of the thousands of Palestinian women who endured the loss of their children, the destruction of their homes, and the jeopardisation to their safety throughout the establishment of the Israeli state. Um Raid continuing to attend to her remaining children and persist with her duties as a mother, whilst in a refugee camp, represents the thousands of Palestinian women who have persevered despite being targets of Israel's gender-based violence. Palestinian women have prioritised their families, homes, and the nation, over their own safety and livelihood. Um Raid's story encapsulates Palestinian women's history. A history of suffering, neglect, and a degree of total cancellation.

This is why I am writing to you today. Throughout my years of exploring this topic at university, Palestinian women's stories, histories, and experiences were almost always out of the conversation.

This is the story of the forgotten refugee. This is the story of the Palestinian women of the Nakba...

A short history of the conflict



The conflict finds itself in a complicated timeline that even I, a history student, find difficult to grasp at times. It is crucial, nonetheless, to understand [the basic set of events](#) that have led to the formation of the Israeli state today.

A visual illustration from *Visualizing Palestine*, displays Israel's settlement projects since 1993. Showing 15 thousands Palestinian houses destroyed. Today the number continues to increase.

Modern Records Centre (MRC), University of Warwick,
Ref: M5524/4652 *Visualizing Palestine*, "20 Years of Talking: Keeping Palestine occupied" 2013.

Founded by Theodore Herzl, Zionism was a movement that emerged among the Jewish communities in Europe in the 1880's in response to the large-scale anti-semitism. Zionists argued that dispersed Jews of the world needed to migrate

and form a state of their own to live in harmony and security. The biblical narrative that justifies the Jewish 'right' to Palestinian land saw Jews emigrating to Palestine as early as 1903.

American historian, Rashid Al-Khalidi, argued that Britain had erupted the problem. Britain's [Balfour declaration](#) (1917) supported the establishment of Palestine as a 'national home' for the Jewish people. In 1948 Britain supported the uprooting of Palestinians, resulting in 700,000 displaced Palestinians, a traumatic event that reigns in the memories of generations of Palestinians today.

How Palestinian women were victims of gender-based violence



Israel's aggression was often gendered and targeted towards the nation's most vulnerable: women and children. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, Palestinian women were subjected to various forms of oppression, including displacement, occupation, and gender-based violence, like sexual assault. The [military checkpoints](#) created a space for regular harassment, assault, and an abuse of power. The photograph taken by *The Palestine Report in 1982* (left) shows a military checkpoint in the West Bank. [In a study](#) on

Military checkpoints were a regularity in occupied regions in Palestine. Checkpoints created a space for men to harass Palestinian women, becoming of the most spaces women experienced abuse and gender based violence.

Modern Records Centre [MRC], University of Warwick, 02602350, *The Palestine Report "Massacre in the Lebanon"* July 1st 1982, p. 6

women in occupied Palestine, women stressed how checkpoints conducted by armed men turned daily experiences like going to school and universities, into a daily struggle. They lost their ability to reach university exams on time, lining up to checkpoints for hours, and often were sexually harassed while being searched by soldiers. There were instances where the soldiers regularly humiliated female students by forcing them to remove their hijabs. In these instances, the veil functioned as marking their presence while also declaring their opposition to the occupation. In these instances of abuse, Palestinian women demonstrated how they were (and still are) victims of gender-based violence and islamophobia under abusers of power, a byproduct of colonial aggression.

Palestinian women's health, employment, and safety were also jeopardised. In recent years, The building of the [Israeli Separation Wall \(ISW\)](#) in 2002 prevented Palestinian women from finding

adequate employment and health care. They spoke of how these limitations caused the men in their lives to become more authoritative and protective, which created stressful home environments. Some of the women found themselves under threat of aggravated violence by their male family members.



Mother and children near rubble of what used to be their home after Israel invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Modern Records Centre [MRC], University of Warwick, 02602350 ,The Palestine Report "Massacre in the Lebanon" July 1st 1982, p. 6, The Palestine Report "Massacre in the Lebanon" 1st, July, 1982 p. 5

Palestinian women were vulnerable to Israel's attack on villages and neighbourhoods, which resulted in thousands of displaced Palestinian women. The ['security reasoning'](#) that historian Nahla Abdo discussed, motivated these frequent attacks. Israel's 'security regulations' were enacted to help the Israeli state sort out who was a 'terrorist' and who could be a threat to Israeli security, which ultimately jeopardised the security of Palestinian women. In such instances, Palestinian women had to seek

refuge and cross unsafe journeys. Destroying a Palestinian woman's home was beyond the material loss. It was an act of stripping them of any protection and security, and the vessel to which the nation's children are brought up . A Palestinian woman's home symbolises unity, love, care, and hope, where she performs generational practices of cooking and nurturing. Thus when taken away, it darkens a woman's life, leading them to migrate elsewhere where they have less rights and are 'rejected by everyone.'



Palestinian woman's home destroyed by Israel in preparation for the extension of the ISW in 2002. Nadirah Shalhub-Kifurkiyan, "Militaryization and violence against women in conflict zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian case-study" (Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 167

The photograph on the left shows a massive rubble taken by a Palestinian woman named Siham, of what [used to be her home](#). The Wall had 'darkened' her life. Her photo mirrors the past that Palestinian women continue to face today. Similar to the photograph from *The Palestine Report*, her picture displays the timelessness of

colonial aggression that deems itself as entitled to colonised people's land .

In Naderah's *Militaryization and violence against women in conflict zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian case-study*, Palestinian women spoke of shared feelings of inferiority. One refugee reported how locals look at them with disdain "They always remind us that we are refugees". Despite being born in Gaza, the women testified to being seen as refugees before they were seen as human beings. This also rings true to the way the western world views them.

The rise of Palestinian Women's Movements



Photograph of Arab Women's congress. Second left is Mattel Mogannam, one of the movement's Leaders. Upon hearing of a new women's movement, the higher commissioner intervened and threatened to stop the demonstration by force.

Ellen Fleischmann "The Emergence of the Palestinian Women's Movement, 1929-39," *University of California Press*, Vol.29(3), 2000 p. 4

The Western powers' refusal to end the suffering of Palestinians, coupled with the failure of the Palestinian quasi-state to organise itself, have contributed to the emergence of the [women's resistance](#) movements. Palestinian women deliberately launched a women-led movement known as *The Arab Women's Congress (AWE)*. On October 26, 1929, more than 200 women attended the congress, which passed resolutions addressing the national problem.

The AWE wrote to the British commissioner,

"We Muslim and Christian ladies who represent the other ladies of Palestine protest vigorously" in response to the British mandate. Their emphasis on unity among Palestinian women displayed what the male-dominated national organisations needed to have.

Although the movement focused on the national issue, it simultaneously situated gender at the centre of its political consciousness. Middle Eastern Historian, Ellen Fleischmann described how the congress acted as a *catalyst* for Palestinian women. The demands presented to the higher commissioner sought to participate in an "Arab women's national awakening (Nahda) like other countries". By referring to their movements as a *women's* movement, the AWE has made a space for Palestinian women to speak out politically, demonstrating some of the early ways that Palestinian women pushed themselves in the political sphere and broke out of their expected role in the resistance, whilst simultaneously making space for future generations

of Palestinian women to engage in the opposition. Women's frequent participation in the demonstrations signified their willingness to engage in "unladylike" and even "violent behaviour" thereby defying their cultural norms that prescribed limited public visibility.



Two women in a demonstration in the United States circa 1979', protesting Israel's right to return laws. Modern Records Centre,(MRC) University of Warwick, 1349/B9/19, Phil Marfleet, *Palestine Lives! A Socialist Worker's Party Pamphlet, 1979, p.16*

Palestinian women have also contributed abroad. Second and third-generation Palestinian immigrants participated in large-scale protests and demonstrations in their host countries. The photo on the left displays a photograph of a rally in the US in the 70's showing a Palestinian American woman and American Jew protesting Israel's '[right to return](#)' laws. Demonstrations occur on a global scale by Palestinian immigrants and their sympathizers.

Women also fought on a 'domestic front' by preserving their cultural roles as carers of the home. It was common practice for Palestinian women to care for the injured, hide and help rebels. [Mothers of martyrs](#), for example, repeatedly discussed the loss of their children and homes in metaphoric terms as the rituals of cooking food, meetings and maintaining social ties. The home is a vessel of unity, love, care, and hope, so women preserved their domestic duties through these practices.

Palestinian Women Today



Mothers of martyrs in West bank. Jenin, Asma, and Hasha, are gathered to celebrate the end of the hunger strike by 1600 Palestinian detainees. Each of them holds a portrait of their relative.

ICRC Archives, Palestine Collection
15/05/2012 accessed at [<https://avarchives.icrc.org/>] Feb, 10, 2022

Portrayed as 'bad mothers', 'terrorists', and even 'voiceless', Palestinian women watched orientalist narratives deflate their images and neglect their efforts. Whether refugees, migrants, or citizens under occupation, Palestinian women's history, legacy, and activism reflect the reality of ethnic women conflicting with colonial violence. Despite the burdensome impacts that the conflict continues to have on Palestinian women, they have continued to resist and persist and for that they should be heard and understood.

This is the Palestinian women of the Nakba and beyond. Their voices are loud and clear for those willing to hear.



Palestinian activist, Muna Al-Kurd. The wall beside her reads "We will not leave" in response to threats of displacements which gained wide social media attention in 2021 and triggered global protests.

(I met Muna myself, she was very inspiring.)

Palestine News and Info Agency, *Occupation forces detain prominent activist Muna al-Kurd in occupied Jerusalem*, URL: <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/124904>, Accessed Feb, 20, 2023)



Due to recurrent electricity cuts in the Gaza Strip, this mother and her children use an oil lamp to do their homework.

ICRC Archives, Palestine Collection, 2021, photographed by Samar Abu El-ouf at [<https://avarchives.icrc.org/>] Accessed at Feb, 10, 2022

Further reads:

Women's struggle with the Israeli prison system: <https://www.pdfdrive.com/captive-revolution-palestinian-womens-anti-colonial-struggle-within-the-israeli-prison-system-e157970359.html>

More refugee stories: <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/shatila-stories>

Separation wall: https://www.makan.org.uk/project_category/separation-wall/

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/AbdoWomen>

More on Muna Al-kurd: <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2021/6096098/muna-mohammed-el-kurd/>

Case studies: https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ICSR-Atkin-Paper_Manar-Faraj.pdf