

RIWAQ Archive

The Registry of Cultural Heritage in Palestine



By Yousef Taha

T

he documentation of cultural heritage in Palestine has always been related to the mission, or systems of control, of colonial and/or Western regimes. The interest in Palestine's geography and history among Western powers, especially the British, started before their colonization. Between 1871 and 1877, the London-based Palestine Exploration Fund carried out the "Survey of Western Palestine" to register and document the Biblical archaeology in Palestine, accompanied by illustrations and drawings. This survey covered 56 percent of Palestine and produced 26 very accurate maps and 13 volumes of text. It reflected an orientalist description of Palestine with a focus on the Biblical story of the



land. From 1915 to the beginning of World War II, the British-Australian and the Ottoman-Bavarian fleets embarked on the systematic documentation of Palestine from above via air photography as part of the war dynamics, tracking enemy movements during wars. During the British colonial era (1917 to 1948), surveys and aerial photographs were carried out in Palestine, motivated by warfare technical and scientific imageries.

The catastrophic loss of Palestine following the *Nakba* (1948) left a

RIWAQ's archive consists of Palestinian documentation of Palestine's cultural heritage that focuses on social and communal life and built heritage. Expressing the Palestinian point of view, it shows Palestinian cultural heritage as a source of identity and belonging and highlights Palestinians and their contribution to the production of knowledge of cultural heritage in general and in Palestine in particular.

cataclysmic impact on Palestine's cultural heritage, manifested, among other aspects, in the destruction of hundreds of villages and towns. The subsequent Israeli documentation of

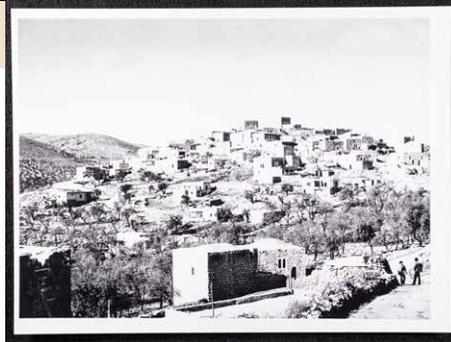


The historic center of Jamma'in, southwest of Nablus. Photo by Lana Judeh, 2011, RIWAQ Photo Archive.



This black-and-white chromogenic photo gives an overview of the historic center of Yatta, south of Hebron, in the 1980s. Photo from the Suad Amiry Photo Collection, Riwaq Photo Archive.

Black-and-white chromogenic photo of Khribet Abu Falah, northeast of Ramallah, in the 1980s. Photo from the Suad Amiry Collection, Riwaq Photo Archive.



cultural heritage in Palestine was selective and conducted with the aim of laying claims over Palestine. Thus, the documentation of traditional architecture in Palestine was carried out to serve the colonial agendas, the consolidation of their power, and their control of the Palestinians rather than scientific or knowledge concerns.

According to the British Mandate laws of 1929 – which adopted the 1906 Ottoman decree for antiquities – what can be protected and registered should have been built before 1700, which excludes a huge number of historic buildings in Palestine. Moreover, the 1929 law allowed for trade in antiquities. Thereafter, consecutive laws issued during the Jordanian rule (in 1966) and under the Israeli civil administration (in 1978 for Jerusalem) adopted the British Mandate laws of 1929 without significant changes.

Following the 1993 Oslo Agreement, RIWAQ Centre for Architectural Conservation was the first Palestinian organization that considered Palestine's cultural heritage as a national asset that could contribute to sustainable development. At

that time, RIWAQ realized the need to have a comprehensive national database that would allow Palestinians to discover, document, and preserve their cultural heritage. The first initiative was carried out after RIWAQ's establishment in 1991 by heritage activists and public space enthusiasts through the project titled RIWAQ's Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine. It resulted in a comprehensive database of the historic buildings in the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip, focusing on the Ottoman period, which the earlier Western surveys and expeditions had overlooked.

From 1994 until 2004, the registry documented 50,320 historic buildings in 422 localities in cities and villages in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. In addition, the registry produced 400 accurate GIS maps

and more than 45,000 photographs of historic buildings. RIWAQ's registry was the fruit of fieldwork carried out by RIWAQ's team and students from Palestinian universities (Birzeit University, Al-Najah National University, the Palestine Polytechnic University of Hebron, and Islamic University of Gaza). The fieldwork was based on questionnaires, on-site plan sketches, and photography. The questionnaires explored the buildings and their physical condition and provided ownership information.

In 2006, the RIWAQ registry was published in three volumes and as an online database.¹ The first volume contains an introduction, the methodology, the localities covered by the study, and sketches that show unique details and features. It focuses mainly on buildings that are at least half a century old. The second volume presents the results of the fieldwork. It gives detailed reports of the conditions and ownership as well as architectural descriptions of buildings in sixteen governorates, eleven of which are in the West Bank (Ramallah and Al-Bireh, Nablus, Jenin, Tubas, Tulkarem, Qalqilia, Jericho, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Salfit, and Hebron). The other five governorates are located in

the Gaza Strip (North Gaza, Gaza City, Deir al-Balah, Khan Younis, and Rafah). The registry could not cover around 10 percent of the West Bank and Gaza, however, due to political and logistical issues. The reports were connected to a GIS map that shows the building locations and related information. The third volume is the illustrated registry. It highlights the human value and physical condition of this heritage and documents the social life in the historic centers of towns and villages and the spatial relation of the historical buildings in their natural or urban context.

In 2018, a law for the protection of cultural heritage in Palestine was enacted through a presidential decree. In fact, the formulation of the law article was the result of collaboration among four Palestinian cultural heritage organizations



A group of historic buildings in Bani Na'em, south of Hebron, in the 1980s. A black-and-white chromogenic photo from the Suad Amiry Photo Collection, Riwaq Photo Archive.



Black-and-white chromogenic photo of the historic center of Yatta, south of Hebron, in the 1980s. Photo from the Suad Amiry Collection, Riwaq Photo Archive.



Decorated stone windows in the castles of Kur, Tulkarem governate.
Photo by Ziya Gafic, 2013, Riwaq Photo Archive.

(RIWAQ, the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation, the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, and Taawon Welfare Association), the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and the UNESCO office in Ramallah and entailed a series of roundtable discussions with stakeholders. However, this law came five decades after the last law for cultural heritage in Palestine, namely the 1966 Jordanian law for the West Bank. The 2018 law is the first Palestinian law for the protection of cultural heritage in Palestine, and it instantly protects what was built before 1917 and after. Nevertheless, for the buildings that were constructed after 1917, a national register/list must be compiled by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. According to the law, this national register/list is required to explain and document the significance and importance of safeguarding the buildings that were constructed after 1917. Currently, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities is working on creating a national database for the historic buildings in Palestine. However, existing bureaucracy and logistics are likely to

hinder the production of the needed registry/list before further losses occur to the built heritage.

RIWAQ's *Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine* is important because it is the first comprehensive national registry of its kind for one of the most endangered components of Palestine's cultural and natural

heritage (architectural heritage) in the West Bank, including Arab Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. But now, sixteen years after its publication, a revisit is needed to account for the current conditions of the registered historic buildings. From our site visits, we know that we have lost a huge amount of our built heritage. RIWAQ estimates that more than 20 percent of our built heritage has been destroyed in the last two decades. In particular, villages such as Dura, Kafr Neme, Al-Sheyukh, and Yabad have lost more than two-thirds of their heritage. This loss is due to unplanned urban expansion and a lack of awareness of the buildings' importance.

Ever since its establishment, RIWAQ has believed in the importance of documenting the history of architecture in Palestine. There are very few publications produced by Palestinians that address this field; the majority of the publications about Palestine are about Biblical sites and written mostly by Western scholars.

RIWAQ's Archive of Cultural Heritage stitches together fragmented Palestine and serves as a tool to strengthen identity and belonging.

To fill this gap, RIWAQ published a monograph series on the history of architecture in Palestine. The themes of these publications are related mainly to the architecture of certain towns, certain architectural features or phenomena, restoration techniques, and restoration projects carried out by RIWAQ, such as the traditional tiles, throne village castles, or caravanserais as well as RIWAQ technical guidelines for the restoration of historic buildings in Palestine. So far, RIWAQ has published 24 books on architectural history in Palestine, with an average of one publication per year. The first

The historic center of Deir Ammar, northwest of Ramallah.
Photo by Tanya Habjouqa, 2013, RIWAQ Photo Archive.





The historic center of Rantis village, northwest of Ramallah. Photo by Lana Judeh, 2011, RIWAQ Photo Archive.

book was published in 2000, and titled *The Traditional Tiles in Palestine*, whereas the last is titled *The Vigilant Eyes of the Sovereign: The Palestine Police between the Ottoman Reforms and Tegar's Colonial Plan* (2020). Currently, RIWAQ is working on *Mills in Palestine: An Industry That Was Devastated by the Industrial Revolution* as well as the book *Modern Palestine: The Architectural Unfulfilled Promise!* Due to the

pandemic, mobility restrictions, and in a conscious act toward knowledge distribution and accessibility, RIWAQ has initiated an online shop that is dedicated to the distribution of books and e-books to a larger audience.ⁱⁱ

RIWAQ's archive contains a huge photographic collection that documents the cultural heritage in Palestine. The photographic collection contains more than 50,000

analog photographs and more than 100,000 digital photographs, with the oldest items dating back to the 1980s. The photos were commissioned by professional photographers and cover the RIWAQ team's work process and Suad Amiry's documentation of rural Palestine during the 1980s. This photographic collection stands witness to the radical transformations that the Palestinian cultural landscape has suffered from, particularly at the end of the twentieth century.

Archives are perceived as the memory of a nation. Archival documents, transcripts, photos, and maps narrate the everyday life of a given society. They bear witness to the main crucial turning points in the history of a society and its accumulated knowledge. But the majority of archives in Palestine are affected by their unique context that is related to the catastrophic colonial fragmentation that Palestine suffered in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, RIWAQ's archive is a

valuable resource for researchers and students and one of the accredited references for the cultural heritage in Palestine. Beyond the regular benefits of an archive, RIWAQ's archive serves to protect and manage what is left of the Palestinian built heritage rather than statically focusing on the past. Although RIWAQ has made strides in rendering available its accumulated knowledge in an organized database, much work is still needed. One of the organization's main goals and dreams is to have its archive organized and sorted in an online database that is easily accessible to students, researchers, governmental organizations, and others.

Yousef Taha has been working as an architect and a restorer of historic buildings for RIWAQ since 2011. He received his bachelor's degree in architecture from Birzeit University in 2009 and his master's degree in built heritage from the University of Malta in 2020. Yousef has participated in numerous workshops and training sessions related to conservation, such as Stone Conservation (SC17) organized by ICCROM in 2018 in Mexico City, and in various workshops related to archive preservation and digitization held by the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) and the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative.



Ceiling painting in Nazareth's old city from the book *Wall and Ceiling Paintings in Notable Palestinian Mansions in the Late Ottoman Period 1856–1917*. Photo by Mia Grondahl, Riwaq Photo Archive.

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ⁱ RIWAQ, Registry of Historic Buildings, available at <https://www.riwaq.org/riwaq-register/registry-historic-buildings>.

ⁱⁱ Please visit www.books.riwaq.org.