when I use the term “modern archiving,” I do not mean the digital technology or infrastructure used in modern archiving facilities, but rather the “philosophy” behind the way archives are structured and used today and the role(s) they play. The fact that more than 90 percent of the museums worldwide today were established after 1950 (they have more than doubled in the last 20 years) makes this change very clear. Museums and libraries (and their archives) are shifting from places in which artifacts and collections are hosted, guarded, and maybe partly displayed to places of vivid interaction, communication, and knowledge exchange. Here, it is the audience, i.e., the recipient, who stands in the center of the archiving facility rather than the artifacts and collections themselves. With the recipients being in the core of the happenings, they keep these facilities and their contents alive, meaningful, and powerful. Hence, archives, especially in areas of conflict, have become on the one hand a valuable booty to put pressure on the other side (as Israel once did with the archive of the Palestinian Research Centre which was looted in 1982 and returned in 1983 to the PLO in exchange for the bodies of three dead soldiers); and on the other hand, they provide a valuable source of information and knowledge which leads to major economic, social, cultural, and political decisions. Digitization and modern archiving technologies provide a certain level of ease of accessibility to various kinds of artifacts, remarkably enabling users to search and find information and material and placing no limits on the time or place of access.

Archives, especially audio and visual archives, can be commercially very interesting too, as today they are also used to generate income. Major production institutions obtain (legally or illegally) collections from various sources and offer what they control against royalties. In Hayes (UK), there exists today one of the largest audio archives worldwide (now property of Warner Music). It also includes historic recordings that were produced decades ago by Arab musicians under the labels His Master’s Voice and EMI. Using content from these archives is normally only possible against fees. However, in a different case, some original film footages from the 1970s that had been looted illegally in Lebanon in 1982 by the Israeli Army were (mis)used in several Israeli TV documentaries in which the copyright source for this material was given as “The Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archive.” These films were also sold to European TV stations (among them, Arte) where fees have surely been paid, yet, not to the original copyright owners!

When I started my journey of searching for Palestinian audio-visual heritage, I must admit that I felt quite a bit of anger when I realized that a major part of our historical audio-visual heritage is not in our own hands. For example, significant picture collections can only be found in Europe and the United States, and none of the dozens of shellac records of Palestinian singers that were produced in the early 1920s can be found in Palestinian or Arab libraries or museums but only in archives in Germany and Europe. These examples illustrate the extent of our deficit. But I also gained greater respect for the European archiving institutions that have preserved this heritage and made it accessible, in many cases digitally as well, allowing access to most Palestinians, regardless of their location. With the Israelis, the case

Modern archiving focuses on enabling users to interact with collected materials rather than merely gathering and preserving artifacts.
is different; another significant part of our audio-visual heritage has been systematically looted over decades as war booty, yet mostly kept under closure until today, to serve only the Israeli narrative. In our Arab part of the world, I cannot discern a long or solid tradition of “archiving” that is collectively or publicly sponsored or conducted. While Israel issued its first laws on archiving as early as the 1950s – of course, mainly to legalize the confiscation and taking over of Palestinian properties – some basic legal regulations are still pending today in Palestine to clarify, for example, which heritage is considered private and which is public. Who decides if the handwritten lyrics by Mahmoud Darwish or the paintings by Ismail Shammout are considered private property or national cultural heritage? And if this is considered national heritage, then who is responsible for its preservation for the coming generations and its accessibility and usage? Or why do we have to go and search foreign archives (such as the Turkish Ottoman archives in Istanbul or Jordanian state archives) to prove that Palestinian families are indeed the legal owners of their houses in Sheikh Jarrah?

Yet, opportunities to change this condition exist. Digitization and modern archiving technologies can play a significant role for us Palestinians. While in Europe and elsewhere in the outside world digitization makes it much easier for scholars and scientists to conduct their research without needing to physically shift place or time and physically move themselves to a library, such accessibility and availability of materials becomes a necessity for Palestinians! Palestinians who live under occupation or in the diaspora are extremely limited in their freedom of movement; thus, physically visiting archival locations that may contain parts of their collective memory (such as museums and/or university libraries) poses a real challenge. Therefore, the virtual accessibility of digitized artifacts and contents must be well considered, planned, and realized practically! It indeed fills me with joy to see the various personal, private, or nongovernmental archiving initiatives that have come to life in the last few years in Palestine and abroad, ranging from the digital archive of the Palestinian Museum,1 realized through Khazaan,2 to the Palestinian Poster Project Archive (PPPA) at the Palestinian Art Court Al-Hoash,3 and a few others. But all of these are legally considered private or nongovernmental initiatives. Guidance by the “state” (or Palestinian National Authority) is simply absent! Considering our rich and diverse heritage and all the initiatives that exist and the conditions that we face today, it becomes increasingly important that the institutions that engage in documenting our history find a professional common ground to coordinate their work and combine their efforts to make it available for research and simple enjoyment.

Undoubtedly, the internet and its open-source platforms (YouTube, Facebook, etc.) provide the largest “digital archive” that we have (if we may call it an archive)! But it is also the most chaotic and least credible one, which makes scientific or professional usage almost impossible. There are, however, numerous collections that can be found in private hands here and there, whose owners are not really aware of their significance for the Palestinian collective memory.

Almost weekly, I stumble across unexpected, very valuable visual and audio collections and artifacts, such as a collection of some 5,000 colored pictures that were taken by the famous National Geographic photographer Thomas Abercrombie in Lebanon in 1975, capturing Palestinian life in the shadow of the PLO and the national struggle movement. A selection of these pictures was intended to be published in an issue of National Geographic along with a detailed article highlighting the Palestinian life of that time. Yet, at the last minute, the article and the pictures were prohibited from being printed and published due to “well-known political reasons”! This collection is hosted today at the archive of the National Geographic Society in the United States and is only partly accessible.

On another occasion, during one of my many recent visits to a private house in Amman, I discovered a huge collection of original picture negatives and positives (slides) that were shot by various Palestinian photographers...
between the late 1960s and early 1980s. Taken mostly in Lebanon, they show a wide range of PLO activities and work. The collection includes original photographs of Yasser Arafat, Archbishop Capucci, the work of the Palestinian Red Crescent, refugee camps, and more. It probably consists of some 10,000 to 15,000 original pictures and negatives and has been bunkered for decades in cardboard boxes without seeing the light. Dozens of other examples that I have been informed about need to be rescued and made accessible as well.

Considering all these given facts, and realizing the challenges that face Palestinian existence, but also seeing the opportunities available to start rescuing our heritage, the need to coordinate and combine all these efforts is now more than urgent. Luckily, digital technology makes things today much easier, enabling us to link and bring together all these initiatives while at the same time (equally important) supporting each initiative in its independence and field of specialization.

We need to create a centralized public institution whose goal is to preserve the cultural and scientific collective memory and heritage of the Palestinian people. Just to make it clear, none of the internationally recognized major public or state-financed archiving institutions – such as the British Library, the Library of Congress, or the German Bundesarchiv – hosts its entire content(s) locally on its own or works completely detached from other archives. They always work within the context of networking with each other and exchanging knowledge, experience, data, and content. Their cooperation with various other archives is structured on different levels, such as the EUROPEANA (the common European digital cultural heritage platform) in which numerous public museums, library archives, and collections from all over Europe are digitally linked, providing for everyone and through one platform digital accessibility to all renowned cultural heritage institutions that are included in the EUROPEANA. Considering the political circumstances surrounding Palestine and the Palestinians, the need for a similar structure (let’s call it here PALESTIANA) is more than urgent!

A detailed project proposal that aims to rediscover and make digitally accessible the Palestinian visual and audio heritage contained in the various private collections, archives, and museums in Europe, Palestine, and elsewhere in the world has already been finalized and presented to the University of Paderborn and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in Germany. Although the project was found to be highly recommendable, it has not yet been launched due to various reasons, which include the pandemic and financial constraints as well as the search for an appropriate academic partner (preferably a university) on the Palestinian side.

The goal of the project is to establish a digital bilingual database (Arabic and English) of all relevant archiving initiatives, museums, collections all over the world that own Palestine-relevant material, cataloguing and classifying them, and finally, providing creditable and scientific information and access to it. It also aims to provide all needed additional services (such as digitization) and knowledge on digital archiving to all relevant initiatives in Palestine and supports the creation of legal archiving regulations. In this way, the project should act as the foundation of a future national archive of Palestine and contribute to its creation.

PALESTIANA could be the name given to a large coordinated effort that connects individuals and groups, under the guidance of a centralized public institution, to support each other in gathering, preserving, and making accessible via digital technology visual and audio materials to document our shared Palestinian history and its cultural and scientific collective memory and heritage.

Bashar Shammout spent his childhood in Beirut amidst the Palestinian national and cultural movement of the 1970s and early 1980s. He studied sound engineering in Germany where he works and lives today and received his doctorate in digital archiving. He has published several articles and a book on the recovery of Palestinian audio-visual heritage and works as a consultant and lecturer in Germany and the Arab world.

An original tape recording with Mahmoud Darwish’s own voice reading his poems at the age of 29 in Beirut. The tape was rediscovered in a private house in Amman in 2021.

Groups of negatives and positive slides that belong to the same collection found recently in Amman with handwritten description in Arabic.


For more information, please visit https://www.khazaaen.org/en/node/1113.