

## **A two-day international Conference at IFI to launch the Palestinian Oral History Archive (POHA)** (June 13-14, 2019)

Written by IFI's interns Solomon Abrahamson and Maya El Dib

On June 12 and 13, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at AUB organized a two-day international conference to celebrate the launch of POHA, a collection of more than 1,000 hours of testimonies with first generation Palestinian refugees and other Palestinian communities in Lebanon. The project was completed in partnership with AUB Libraries, the Nakba Archive, and the Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts (AL-JANA) and made possible thanks to the funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The conference kicked off with an emotional introduction from Kaoukab Chebaro and Hana Sleiman, project managers of the POHA archive, who expressed their excitement for this event, which represents the fruit of years of archival labour. Rayan El-Amine, Assistant Director of IFI, said that he was proud that IFI was part of this incredible project since its inception in 2009. Fadlo Khuri, AUB President, commented on the fact that the event was standing room only and described the project as “a lens into the lives of people who were robbed of their identity.” Similarly, Tarek Mitri, IFI’s Director, spoke about the importance of having such an archive, saying “oral history may rescue from obscurity the neglected Palestinian past.” Finally, University Librarian Lokman. Meho promised “not [to] stop with only 1000 hours of interviews,” and shared his aspirations to continue adding to the archive in the years to come.

Following the opening remarks, Diana Allan, co-founder of the Nakba Archives, undertook what she described as the “daunting task [of] introducing [her] co-panellists and honorees. Allan praised the honorees, Rosemary Sayigh, Bayan Nuwayhed Al-Hout, and Faiha Abdulhadi for having “recognized the importance of recording the experience of those who have not been disseminated in official histories, especially women.” Sayigh, Al-Hout, and Abdulhadi then shared their personal encounters with oral history, talking about the importance of sharing the testimonies of the voiceless and disenfranchised.

Joining his fellow Nakba archive co-founder on stage, Mahmoud Zeidan talked about his long journey with oral history that first started in 2002 when he and Diana agreed about “the necessity of having a popular archive that would preserve the stories of refugees on video tapes as heritage for generations to come.” Moataz Dajani, founder of the AL-JANA archives, highlighted the importance of getting children involved in oral history, sharing his organization’s experience in encouraging child refugees to become young researchers within the camps by talking with elders. Chebaro and Sleiman then acknowledged the work of AUB libraries, staff members, and all those who contributed to the archive’s digitization process.

The two then revealed the archive's interface to the applause and cheers of the audience. Hana and Kaoukab introduced three women who were involved in POHA's digitization process at AUB libraries. Sara Sweidan, Hana Haidar, and Nourhan Shehab, gave a live project demo, highlighting some of the capabilities and features of POHA.

The first day closed with a discussion panel that focused on the technological advancements that have allowed archives to become more interactive and user friendly. Sohail Dahdal started the discussion by explaining his work with Virtual Reality (VR) technology. He streamed a video representing a journey in old city Jerusalem through VR which led to gasps and cheers from the audience, who were astounded by the lifelike experience of walking through the city. Ahmad Barclay followed up with a presentation of interactive maps that linked POHA data with specific villages in Palestine. Finally, Majd-Shihabi spoke about the MASRAD, a platform used in creating POHA's user friendly interface.

The second day of the conference featured four panels gathering international scholars specialized in oral history. The first panel focused on the power of Nakba memory and the necessity of preserving and keeping this traumatic memory alive. While May Seikaly exposed the power disparities between interviewer and interviewee when collecting oral history accounts of the Nakba, Ahlam Muhtaseb highlighted the importance of allowing Palestinians to speak for themselves in order to "de-colonize ethnographic research as a scholarly practice." Sophie Richter-Devroe shared her desire to preserve the stories of Nawab Bedouin Women from historical Southern Palestine, saying, "I want this culture to live." Finally, Malaka Shwaikh joined the conversation via video projection to articulate the "significance of intergeneration and transregional narratives" in Palestinian communities.

The next session focused on the connection between oral history, pedagogy, and culture. Chandni Desai talked about the Palestine repertoire as a form of cultural resistance. Nadia Younes emphasized what it may look like to transform education into an integral part of the Palestinian struggle. Finally, Maria Bashshur Abunnasr showcased her toolkit in using oral testimonies to teach lesser-known histories in Lebanon.

In the afternoon Dr. Huda Zurayk chaired an insightful session on Women's role in oral history through spreading Women's histories, which are often missing from textual sources. Cynthia Kreichati spoke about oral history methodology as a particular mode of 'attunement' that can allow silenced women to be heard. Isis Nusair's presentation addressed women's memories and how they imagined Palestine, and Deema Kaedbey talked about her work in the Knowledge Workshop, a feminist oral history project.

The final session emphasized the relation between oral history and urbanity. Taking the example of Nahr el Bared, Azadeh Sobout talked about the refugee camp not only as a shelter, but as a place to reassemble and offer reconstitution of the past. Diala Lteif then gave an overview of Lebanon's history of refugees in the Quarantina neighbourhood of Beirut. Susann Kassem then focused on Lebanese southern border communities, whose nation state belonging has changed throughout history, as potentially rich site of oral history. Lastly, Kholoud Al-Ajarma joined via video to talk about Palestinian land claim narratives as a source of opposition against unjust Israeli policies.

The conference ended with a group discussion with the audience and the project managers on the future of POHA and what would be the next phase. While some things remain uncertain, the scholars reaffirmed their commitment to build a dynamic community of engaged oral historians and activists whose work exposes truths of the triumphs and struggles of Palestinians.

Link to POHA <https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/>

Link to POHA [Brochure](#) – [Program](#)

Links of POHA's Video Recordings

Day 1:

[Opening Session](#)

[Session 1](#)

[Session 2](#)

[Session 3](#)

[Session 4](#)

Day 2:

[Session 5](#)

[Session 6](#)

[Session 7](#)

[Session 8](#)

[Closing Remarks](#)