



## *JPS* “Hidden Gems” and “Greatest Hits”: Rise Up and Write; Palestinians Making History

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### ABSTRACT

Perusing *JPS*'s fifty years of documenting Palestinian history, this essay reminds us that history is both “what happened” as well as “the narration of what happened.” Anchoring his selection in that perspective, Alex Winder identifies Charles Anderson’s “State Formation from Below and the Great Revolt in Palestine” (2017) as a *JPS* “hidden gem,” and Tarif Khalidi’s “Palestinian Historiography: 1900–1948” (1981) as a “greatest hit.” Relying on primary sources by participants in the rebellion and highlighting the history of the revolt, Anderson shifts the focus of traditional accounts of the revolt from the mostly ineffective role of Palestinian notables and elites to the successes of the rebels. In a similar vein, Khalidi’s article paints a picture of a rich and vibrant Palestinian intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century that reverses the conventional view of the colonized as reactive and of the colonizer as the primary agent of history.

### KEYWORDS

Palestinian Indigeneity;  
de-exceptionalization;  
Great Revolt; Palestine  
studies; intellectual history

IT IS NO EASY TASK to be handed a half-century of *Journal of Palestine Studies* (*JPS*) issues from which to select just two articles within a category as expansive and weighted as “history” (even if that history is limited to the past century or so, as Salim Tamari addresses Ottoman Palestine specifically in an essay that will appear in the next issue of the *Journal*). To add to the difficulty of the endeavor, the word “history” carries two meanings: “what happened,” as well as its narration or “that which is said to have happened.”<sup>1</sup> The *Journal* has, over its fifty years, made sustained and substantive contributions toward each understanding of Palestinian history, documenting and analyzing the sociohistorical processes that have shaped Palestinian experiences on the one hand, and probing the discourses that highlight, efface, and frame these processes on the other.<sup>2</sup>

An excellent example of the first kind of history is Charles W. Anderson’s “State Formation from Below and the Great Revolt in Palestine,” a “hidden gem” published in the Autumn 2017 issue of *JPS*.<sup>3</sup> It might be a bit unfair to describe as a hidden gem an article published barely three years ago, which may simply have not had sufficient time to attain “greatest hit” status (as, indeed, I hope “State Formation from Below” does). The 1936–39 revolt, known as the Great Revolt, is without question one of the most significant events in the history of modern Palestine, but the most important English-language monograph on the revolt published in the last twenty-five years has been penned by an anthropologist.<sup>4</sup> Further, as Anderson notes, historians in recent years have tended to narrow the revolt’s significance to the negative effects of its suppression, which are seen as having paved the way for the catastrophe of 1948 less than a decade later. Anderson is not inattentive to the ways in which the joint British-Zionist

counterinsurgency decimated the Palestinian political leadership (via imprisonment, exile, and assassination), as well as the population at large (via mass detention; restrictions on movement; the despoliation of food and other household supplies; and the demolition of homes, neighborhoods, and infrastructure—what Anderson has elsewhere called the “destruction of everyday life”<sup>5</sup>). In “State Formation from Below,” however, he argues that the revolt’s importance should also be located in the rebels’ success—however short-lived—in building a counterstate infrastructure that sustained the uprising and organized its supporters in a bid for Palestinian liberation.

This success becomes particularly visible as Anderson shifts the focus away from the (largely ineffective) elite leadership of the Arab Higher Committee, and the tensions between the Husaynis and the Nashashibis, and toward the workers, peasants, and youth activists who were the lifeblood of the revolt.<sup>6</sup> These groups came together in the decentralized network of national committees that enforced the general strike in 1936 and also mobilized communities and managed resources as the strike stretched on month after month, from April until October. Examining the second part of the revolt, Anderson turns his attention to the system of justice established by Palestinian insurgents, “in many ways the crown jewel of rebel self-organization and institutional development.”<sup>7</sup> This rebel court system dealt with matters of discipline among the rebellion’s armed forces and with other exigencies, but it also served the broader Palestinian population, resolving disputes of all kinds. Despite its decentralized nature and resulting unevenness, the rebel justice system articulated a vision of justice rooted in preexisting Palestinian social practices but also striving toward a liberated future. In both respects, it allowed Palestinians engaged in the uprising “to display their concern for the lives of the common people and to show their solidarity with the downtrodden rural majority.”<sup>8</sup> It is this positive vision of Palestinian society as much as that society’s opposition to British imperial power and Zionist settler colonialism that made the Great Revolt such a landmark event in Palestinian history.

Anderson’s fine-grained analysis of the revolt illuminates its particularities, but his framing also works to de-exceptionalize Palestine and the Palestinians. Palestinians looked across the borders imposed by European powers after World War I and saw protests in Egypt winning the reinstatement of the constitution from British colonial rulers, and a general strike in Syria winning negotiations with French colonial officials. Zionism imposed unique circumstances on Palestinians, but it did not sever their natural integration into a larger regional milieu. Further, contra the Orientalist construction of Arabs generally and Palestinians in particular as inherently violent, easily manipulated by corrupt and antidemocratic leadership (as represented by Haj Amin al-Huseini), and riven by internecine feuding, Anderson shows the dynamics that characterized the Great Revolt to be consistent with those found in peasant uprisings and processes of state formation elsewhere (as described by Eric Wolf and Charles Tilley, respectively). The revolt’s inability to expel Britain or its Zionist protégés from Palestine is not, in Anderson’s analysis, due to some unique failing of the Palestinians, but to “the vastly superior forces—military, police, and Zionist auxiliaries totaling over twenty-five thousand men, plus armored units, artillery batteries, and the RAF [Royal Air Force]—arrayed against the insurgents.”<sup>9</sup> Palestinians were not incapable, they were simply outgunned.

One of the strengths of “State Formation from Below” is its effective use of the contemporary and post-hoc analysis of the Great Revolt by its Palestinian participants, including Bahjat Abu Gharbiyya, Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, ‘Isa al-Sifri, Subhi Yasin, and Akram Zu‘aytir. This is not just a matter of mining underutilized sources for additional data, but of giving due attention to Palestinians’ narration of what happened, of taking seriously Palestinian history in both

meanings of the word. The appreciation of Palestinians' historical production in "State Building from Below" is something the article shares with Tarif Khalidi's "Palestinian Historiography: 1900–1948," a "greatest hit" published in the Spring 1981 issue of *JPS*.<sup>10</sup>

In "Palestinian Historiography," Khalidi seeks to "distinguish and assess the particular cultural reflexes"<sup>11</sup> of Palestinians in the first half of the twentieth century, pushing back against the notion that this was a period of "Arab cultural barrenness"<sup>12</sup> that followed the florescence associated with the nineteenth-century *Nahda*. Khalidi describes history as "something of a national pastime"<sup>13</sup> among Palestinians during the Mandate period, and the desire to document an existence erased in colonial narratives aroused a "passionate intensity"<sup>14</sup> in this historical writing. The sociocultural environment of Mandate Palestine—"the network of cultural relationships and the diffusion of cultural institutions"<sup>15</sup>—and the pressing political question of Zionist colonization shaped the agents, avenues, and attitude of Palestinian knowledge production, as Palestinian intellectuals flocked to "declamatory professions" in law, education, and journalism. Khalidi thus gives readers a sense of the vibrant intellectual atmosphere of Palestine during the Mandate, providing a kind of annotated bibliography of significant works that emerged during this period.

Perhaps most notable, however, is the way Khalidi's discussion of Palestinian knowledge production in the first half of the twentieth century resonates with what we might call the "Indigenous turn" in Palestinian studies.<sup>16</sup> Following the reemergence of settler colonialism as a framework for understanding dynamics in Palestine, from the late nineteenth century to the present, scholars have also begun to challenge the way certain uses of this framework continue to relegate the colonized to a reactive position, whose actions and identities are legible only in relation to the colonizer, which continues to be the primary agent of history.<sup>17</sup> This has prompted a further effort to make Palestinian Indigeneity, rather than Zionist settler colonialism, the structuring analytic—a move that, as Rana Barakat argues elsewhere, offers "a potential framework that takes into account the settler-colonial studies analytic and the Native/settler binary as one of many points of departure in a larger quest toward indigenous knowledge production."<sup>18</sup>

Khalidi's article provides insight into the kinds of Indigenous knowledge production taking place in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, much of the intellectual output is concerned with Zionism's settler-colonial project, but it also exceeds the colonial frame. The texts that Khalidi addresses in "Palestinian Historiography" not only work to document Palestinian Indigeneity—as in Father A. S. Marmarji's *Buldaniyyat Filastin al-ʿarabiyya*, a "monumental topographical historical dictionary of Arab Palestine,"<sup>20</sup> or the studies of Tawfiq Canaan, Stephan Hanna Stephan, and ʿUmar al-Salih al-Barghuthi, whose ethnographic works speak, according to Khalidi, in "the voice of the cultural historian striving to show the Semitic roots of the Palestinian peasant as an ancient and continuous occupier of the land"<sup>21</sup>—but lead us toward recovering Indigenous Palestinian epistemologies. Some of the most important and innovative work in Palestinian studies continues to revisit the works of Palestinian scholars from the first half of the twentieth century not only as records of the past, but to generate new ways of approaching and interpreting that past.<sup>22</sup> Finally, Khalidi's article is in itself an example of the crucial role that *JPS* has played in making Indigenous Palestinian knowledge production available to an anglophone audience.

As both these articles affirm, Palestinians have waged their battles physically in the cities, villages, and countryside of Palestine, and discursively in the textbooks, newspapers, scholarly journals, lectures, and histories that they wrote. They drew their strength from

individual and collective efforts across society: activists as well as intellectuals, elites and professionals, as well as workers and peasants. These struggles were not merely reactive, resisting the settler-colonial impulse toward the elimination of the Indigenous; instead, they were proactive, calling forth institutions to remake Palestinian society as its insurgents hoped they might ultimately be able to do, and writing histories that connected Palestinians inextricably to the land of Palestine and to the larger history of the Arab people. Anderson and Khalidi, each in his own way, present Palestinians as both subjects and objects of history, as active agents in both what happened and that which is said to have happened. This is no small thing and, within a broader constellation of institutions and individuals engaged in the endeavor, *JPS* has for half a century played a crucial role in “writing Palestinians into history.”

## About the Author

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## Endnotes

1. I draw this phrasing from Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who continues: “The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.” Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 2.
2. Perhaps the most significant historiographical contribution, whose focus on Ottoman Palestine places it beyond the scope of this essay, is Beshara Doumani’s “Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History,” *JPS* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1992): pp. 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537216>. Other historiographical works include: Joel Beinin, “Forgetfulness for Memory: The Limits of the New Israeli History,” *JPS* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2005): pp. 6–23, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2005.34.2.006>; Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg, “Popular Culture, Relational History, and the Question of Power in Palestine and Israel,” *JPS* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2004): pp. 5–20, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2004.33.4.005>; and Lorenzo Veracini, “The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel, and the Occupation,” *JPS* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2013): pp. 26–42, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2013.42.2.26>. Notable works of history (of the “what happened” variety) appearing in *JPS* are too numerous to list here.
3. Charles W. Anderson, “State Formation from Below and the Great Revolt in Palestine,” *JPS* 47, no. 1 (Autumn 2017): pp. 39–55, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2017.47.1.39>.
4. Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). The other foundational English-language work on the revolt, which appeared some two decades before Swedenburg’s, was a translation of Ghassan Kanafani’s pamphlet, *The 1936–39 Revolt in Palestine* (New York: Committee for a Democratic Palestine, 1972), <http://pflp-documents.org/documents/PFLP-Kanafani3639.pdf>. More recently, Matthew Kraig Kelly and Matthew Hughes have published books focusing on Britain’s efforts to quash the revolt.
5. Charles W. Anderson, “The Suppression of the Great Revolt and the Destruction of Everyday Life in Palestine,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 79 (Autumn 2019): pp. 9–27, <https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/Pages%20from%20JQ%2079%20-%20Anderson.pdf>; and “From Petition to Confrontation: The Palestinian National Movement and the Rise of Mass Politics, 1929–1939” (PhD diss., New York University, 2013).

6. For a similar approach to the 1929 Buraq Revolt, see Rana Barakat, "The Jerusalem Fellah: Popular Politics in Mandate-Era Palestine," *JPS* 46, no. 1 (Autumn 2016): pp. 7–19, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2016.46.1.7>.
7. Anderson, "State Formation from Below," p. 45.
8. Anderson, "State Formation from Below," p. 47.
9. Anderson, "State Formation from Below," p. 49.
10. Tarif Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography: 1900–1948," *JPS* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1981): pp. 59–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536460>.
11. Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography," p. 60.
12. Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography," p. 59.
13. Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography," p. 76.
14. Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography," p. 60.
15. Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography," p. 61.
16. As Makere Stewart-Harawira writes, there is

nothing new about the idea that Indigenous people conduct research . . . Arguably what might be new, at least as far as the last thirty or so years are concerned, is the formalizing and positioning of Indigenous research as both an act of re-claiming Indigenous sovereignty and authority and as an anti-colonial process of engagement by Indigenous scholars and researchers with mainstream, western science, an engagement that is transforming western research. At the same time, Indigenous researchers claim their ways of knowing and doing research as valid, legitimate and essential ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

- See Makere Stewart-Harawira, "Challenging Knowledge Capitalism: Indigenous Research in the 21st Century," *Socialist Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2013): p. 39, <https://doi.org/10.18740/S43S3V>.
17. See Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine"; and Rana Barakat, "Writing/Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): pp. 349–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2017.1300048>.
  18. Barakat, "Writing/Righting," p. 358. She draws here on Robert Warrior's framework of "Indigenous sovereignty."
  19. In this it overlaps and builds upon Adnan Abu-Ghazaleh's "Arab Cultural Nationalism in Palestine during the British Mandate," *JPS* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1972): pp. 37–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2535866>.
  20. Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography," p. 64.
  21. Khalidi, "Palestinian Historiography," p. 65.
  22. Doumani's "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine" is a classic example of this critical work. Among more recent examples, see: the publication of excerpts of George Mansour's "The Arab Worker under the Palestine Mandate" (1937) and Fayez Sayegh's "Zionist Colonialism in Palestine" (1965) in the special issue of *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012) titled "Past Is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine," and coedited by Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie, and Sobhi Samour; the June 2018 colloquium, "Palestinian Historians/Historians of Palestine: Writing under the Mandate and Beyond," organized by Sarah Irving at King's College, London, <https://tibawiatkings.wordpress.com/home/>; Seraj Assi, *The History and Politics of the Bedouin: Reimagining Nomadism in Modern Palestine* (New York: Routledge, 2018), chap. 4; and Salim Tamari, *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).