

Memory under siege

CALL FOR ACTION TO PRESERVE PALESTINIAN CULTURE



Preventing cultural erasure in Palestine through preservation and justice

Cultural memory in Palestine faces ongoing threats from physical destruction, spatial displacement, and narrative suppression. This paper explores how Israeli occupation, military operations, and heritage policies have contributed to systematic cultural erasure in both Gaza and the West Bank. It emphasizes the need for preservation as both a cultural and political act and argues that justice for Palestinians must include mechanisms for safeguarding memory and heritage. Drawing on international law, grassroots preservation, and post-conflict recovery models, this paper proposes an integrated approach combining memory work, legal accountability, and community-based resilience.

The Palestinian people possess one of the richest, most ancient cultural tapestries in the world. From Canaanite cities and Byzantine mosaics to Islamic architecture and oral traditions, Palestinian heritage is a living testimony to uninterrupted civilization and rootedness. Yet, under conditions of occupation, siege, and forced displacement, this cultural memory is under siege. This paper investigates how cultural erasure is taking place across Palestine - especially Gaza and East Jerusalem - and how targeted preservation efforts and calls for justice can resist such erasure.

Understanding cultural erasure

Cultural erasure refers to the deliberate or systematic suppression, destruction, or denial of cultural identity, expressions, or memory. It may take material forms – demolishing mosques, historic homes, archives – or immaterial ones, such as banning language, suppressing rituals, or controlling narratives.

In the Palestinian context, cultural erasure is closely linked to settler colonial practices: depopulating villages, renaming places, rewriting histories, and criminalizing memory. Erasure functions not only to eliminate the past but to obstruct claims to the future.

The contemporary artists are not allowed to create, produce and exhibit their artworks. Also, the artists from the Palestinian diaspora are censured or hindered in many countries around the world. The destruction of UNESCO sites and cultural heritage in general now affects all war zones as Ukraine, Iran, Lebanon, and others.

The erasure of culture in Palestine, unfortunately, takes on a different meaning. It is a systematic process that has lasted for decades, affecting all areas of both tangible and intangible culture, and it is a fundamental instrument in the erasure of the Palestinian people. Preventing cultural erasure in Palestine is not only about preserving buildings it is about protecting identity, memory, and rights.

Grassroots memory work

Palestinians have responded to cultural erasure with innovative, community-driven acts of resistance that preserve memory, identity, and connection to place. These grassroots practices operate outside (and sometimes despite) formal institutions, making them flexible, resilient, and deeply rooted in everyday life.

These acts include the followings:

- **Digital archives**

(e.g., *Palestinian Oral History Archive*, *Visualizing Palestine*).

- **Community museums in refugee camps**

(e.g., *Ibdaa Cultural Center in Dheisheh*).

- **3D reconstructions of destroyed villages and shrines**

(e.g., *Forensic Architecture*)

- **Small but relevant actions to preserve the tangible heritage:**
the Gaza Library and others.

- **Individual and collective actions produced by local artists**
in dramatic contexts.

Our Goals

DOMAIN	ACTIONS
Documentation	• Launch a comprehensive, digital, open-source Palestinian heritage map. • Include GIS data, artworks, oral histories, and destroyed sites.
Support to contemporary artists	• Encourage the movement of artists, including by facilitating the issuance of visas. • Encourage the participation of Palestinian artists in international exhibitions and biennials. • Encourage the establishment of production workshops.
Legal action	• Push for war crime investigations under cultural heritage clauses. • Nominate key Palestinian sites for emergency UNESCO protection.
Education	• Integrate memory preservation and the Palestinian narrative into school curricula. • Fund community history projects across Gaza and the West Bank.
Post-War planning	• Mandate cultural preservation in all donor-funded rebuilding efforts. • Involve local experts and displaced residents in site rehabilitation.

Conclusion

The struggle for Palestine is also a struggle for memory.

Every destroyed mosque, every silenced story, and every renamed hilltop is a blow not only to history, but to the right of a people to exist as a people. Yet, Palestinians continue to resist erasure through acts of remembrance, archiving, storytelling, and rebuilding.

To prevent cultural erasure, preservation must be linked to justice – legal, spatial, historical. Memory is not a luxury of peace; it is the foundation of dignity.

We invite

- Experts, artists and opinion leaders to support this call for action;
- Cultural public and private Institutions around the world to give their technical and/or financial support;
- Unesco, Icomos, Alecso and other international cultural organization to disseminate this document.

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