



A TRIBUTE LONG OVERDUE: ROSEMARY SAYIGH AND PALESTINIAN STUDIES

Rosemary Sayigh—writer, activist, mentor, and ethical compass—has arguably made a greater impact on Palestinian studies than most scholars over the past generation. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon; women under occupation; oral history of the Nakba; gender and politics; memory and identity; culture and resistance; the political responsibility of the researcher—these are but some of the lines of inquiry she has pioneered. Starting with her classic book, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries; A People's History*, published thirty years ago, she has become the unofficial mentor of large numbers of PhD students specializing in the above fields. “Unofficial” because, although she has been an indispensable resource for emerging scholars, she remains an outsider to institutions of higher education. She has never held a permanent academic position and was largely shunned by universities and research centers in Lebanon, the country where she has lived for more than fifty years. This special issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies (JPS)* in honor of Rosemary Sayigh is richly deserved and long overdue.

Sayigh’s outsider status is partly due to the fact that her work is firmly focused on Palestinians, not Palestine. Studies on state politics, nationalist movements, and the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict have long dominated academic scholarship and public discourse. Sayigh’s key contribution is in expanding the meanings of the “political” and the “historical” to include the experiences and memories of ordinary Palestinians: refugees, camp dwellers, women, and rank-and-file political activists and community organizers. In a series of influential articles, she has provided critical insights into how their quotidian struggles allowed them to remain resilient and to act as historical agents despite the overwhelming forces that sought to dehumanize them, erase them as a political community, and violently suppress or contain them.

Rosemary’s keen ethnographic eye allows Palestinian lives to emerge with immediacy and richness. At the same time, her empathy and solidarity are such that she never loses sight of the larger political and moral contexts. More than most writers, she is able to weave textured narratives of individuals with names, aspirations, compelling life experiences, and articulate voices into a metanarrative about what the question of Palestine looks like from the bottom up. In so doing, she has made a deep impression on younger scholars, especially in the fields of anthropology, oral history, refugee studies, and gender studies.

Sayigh’s significance to the study of Palestinians rests only partly on her ability to make visible the complicated and dynamic worlds that churn below the radar of so many writers on the “Palestine question.” Just as important

are the political, moral, and ethical principles that inform how she conducts her research. She constantly reflects on and questions the validity, objectives, and effectiveness of research and writing on the lives of Palestinians and their national aspirations. She does not do so according to the norms of conventional academic training, which emphasizes objectivity and detachment, nor in sympathy with the now-popular self-reflexive trend in anthropology. Rather, she does so out of deep humility and respect for her interlocutors/friends, and out of political solidarity. Indeed, she sees her work as part of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and as a means to empower the people who were good enough to talk with her.

Sayigh's acute sensitivity to the injustice wrought upon the Palestinians and their oppression as a people has made the nationalist or anticolonial imperative the dominant theme of her work. Combined with her sense of injustice is her firm belief in the agency of the poor, the displaced, the marginalized. These complementary but sometimes contradictory dispositions derive from several sources, including her parents who were active in Britain's Labour Party and the atmosphere surrounding the independence struggles in Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba. The title of her first book, *From Peasants to Revolutionaries*, could easily have applied to any of these struggles that combined populist mobilization around social issues with an anti-imperialist stance.

At the same time, and unlike many nationalist scholars, Sayigh has long explored the gender, class, and refugee dimensions of the Palestinian experience. Most of her interlocutors have been refugee camp women. Umm Joseph, Umm Hussein, and Umm Mustafa were her keys to the refugee camps of Dbayeh, Burj al-Barajneh, and Shatila, respectively. These women—articulate, worldly, hardworking, and resourceful network builders—did not fit the stereotypes pervasive among middle- and upper-class Palestinians in Lebanon who had never lived in the camps and who often perceived their camp-dwelling counterparts, especially women, with the same haute enlightenment spirit that famously led Karl Marx to refer to peasants as “a sack of potatoes.”

As Sayigh became intimately associated with camp life in the early 1970s, two sets of absences in political discussions and academic writings about Palestine became obvious. First were the traumatic yet highly differentiated experiences of the 1948 Nakba, the single most formative event in modern Palestinian history. Second were the ways that Palestinian camp-dwelling refugees drew on their peasant roots, especially kinship and local identification, to reconstitute their lives and participate in the Palestinian national movement. Realizing early on that these absences were not due to lack of knowledge but to how knowledge is produced by academia and the elites, she began devoting her energies to breaking these silences and searching for an analytical language to explain them. That passion has never waned. Thirty years later, on 8 October 2004, we both received a cryptic email from Rosemary without comment or signature. It simply stated:

A wonderful quote: "That some people and things are absent from history, lost, as it were, to the possible world of knowledge, is much less relevant to historical practice than the fact that some people and things are absent in history, and that this absence itself is constitutive of the process of historical production." M-R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (1995)

It is therefore not surprising that throughout her long research and writing career, Sayigh has had an ambivalent relationship with the "process of historical production." She engages in it, but constantly questions her research agenda and even whether the research should be conducted in the first place. The Palestinians themselves, she always insists, must make these decisions, and she must "flow" with them. Humble to a fault, discreet, unflinching in her loyalty to her friends, she does not ask the now-standard reflexive question: "How does my subjectivity affect my relationship to the subjects of my research?" Rather, she poses the standard solidarity question: "How does my work help or hinder the lives of my friends in the camps and the cause of Palestine?" In pursuing her research, Rosemary constantly reflects on the political implications of posing certain questions instead of others, and/or of posing any questions at all.

This ethic took shape in a specific historical context. In the early 1970s, when Sayigh started researching and writing, the dignity, human worth, and agency of ordinary Palestinians seemed self-evident. Palestinian camp dwellers in Lebanon stood front and center in the political universe of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) at precisely its moment of triumph: recognition by the world as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people. Ironically, the PLO achieved this success partly by turning the refugees from active subjects of the revolution into the passive objects that symbolized it.

Having experienced this moment in its fully intensity, Rosemary never lost sight of culture as resistance or her belief in the power of ordinary people to effect major social change. This has helped sustain the researchers who followed in her footsteps, especially as the circumstances of Palestinian camp-dwelling refugees in Lebanon grew increasingly dire with the succession of tragedies that seemed to rob them of their humanity: the Lebanese civil war (1975-89), Israel's expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon and the Sabra and Shatila massacres (1982), the gruesome and lonely camp wars that followed (1985-88), and the hopelessness, poverty, and uncertainty facing them after the Oslo accords essentially abandoned them to their fate.

Ironically, the more the conditions of Palestinian camp-dwelling refugees deteriorated, the more intensively they have been studied. There is by now a critical mass of theoretically astute publications based on painstaking field research that have opened up the study of Palestinians as a field and moved it forward along a wide range of trajectories. Sayigh was instrumental in facilitating many of these projects, which she read carefully, learning from their new approaches and perspectives.

It is remarkable that even in her eighties, and without the benefit of a university atmosphere as an incubator of ideas for most of her career, Rosemary Sayigh has made methodological and theoretical interventions that place her at the cutting edge of some of the most important debates in the field. Specifically, she has argued strongly for the need to decolonize and democratize Palestinian studies, going so far as to question whether the extremely popular oral history initiatives may be doing more harm than good. Oral history, she argues, is being pursued in ways that reproduce hierarchy and injustice instead of encouraging liberation. Drawing on recent debates on this topic from Latin America to Japan, she argues that the two most common objectives of researchers—giving voice and community-as-beneficiary—need to be discarded in favor of *sharing* voice and community-as-partner; that is, a more equitable arrangement wherein the local communities participate in formulating research agendas and use knowledge production as part of a larger strategy to improve their conditions.¹

Given Sayigh's radical questioning of research agendas long taken for granted, it seems appropriate here to reflect critically on the political implications of studying Palestinians, as the field has developed over the past generation. In brief, three issues can be highlighted. First is the question of *which* Palestinians are being studied. The overwhelming concern seems to be residents of refugee camps in Lebanon. The refugees who do not reside in the camps—roughly half the Palestinians in the country—are not of interest to most researchers. Even less of interest are the refugees (in camps or otherwise) in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and elsewhere (Jordan being a partial exception). Conspicuous is the hyperfocus on the Shatila camp. The din of foot traffic to and from Shatila of PhD students, journalists, writers, film makers, oral historians, and workers in a wide range of NGOs contrasts sharply with the silences surrounding other "kinds" of Palestinians. Obviously, Shatila is the most accessible to Beirut-based researchers, but Burj al-Barajneh and other nearby camps, which are almost as accessible, gain attention only as afterthoughts. More relevant no doubt is the fact that Shatila witnessed the most frequent and dramatic periods of violence. Tragedy has always been a major seductive force for academic production and public discourse. In the same vein is Shatila's grinding poverty, even relative to other camps. The focus on victimization and indigence by those researching Palestinians is so pervasive that middle- and upper-class Palestinians in Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere are largely excluded from the field, as if the political sense of the word "Palestinian" does not apply to them. What is certain is that the constant focus on misery and problems without subsequent follow-up and building of long-lasting relations (the hallmarks of Sayigh's research) can be dehumanizing and disempowering. No doubt the many excellent studies of residents of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon have made a positive difference on both the scholarly and political fronts. This difference would even be greater if researchers engaged Palestinians in the process of knowledge production, such as conceptualizing research questions, designing investigative methodologies,

analyzing findings, and making publications accessible in languages they can read.

A second issue is the seeming identification of “Palestinian-ness” with refugee camp residents. This has led some researchers to view camps simply as repositories of memories about Palestine and as incubators of Palestinian identity. Implicit here is a devaluation of, if not blindness to, memories and ongoing experiences that contradict or lead away from a nationalist imaginary of what was and what ought to be. This puts an impossibly heavy burden on camp residents, for it transforms them into a decontextualized embodiment of an abstracted Palestine and Palestinians. This “Palestino-centrism” also blinds researchers to comparative analysis, even though many communities in the Arab world and beyond are characterized by socioeconomic and political conditions similar to Palestinian refugee camps. The lack of comparative analysis makes it easier to isolate Palestinians and to use their cause as a convenient smokescreen and political football in interstate politics.

Third, identity politics initially dominated research agendas at the expense of understanding internal class structure and power relations. Hence, the tendency to represent camps as cohesive entities comprising distinct sections based on village origin and the urban/rural binary this implies. It is as if the intervening decades have redeployed but not transformed the “traditional” or “primordial” social relations of the pre-1948 era. In addition, scant attention is paid to the fact that Palestinian camps now house large numbers of marginalized non-Palestinians dislocated by neoliberal policies, foreign invasions, and civil war. Some camps, such as Yarmouk in Damascus, are home not only to poor Syrians of all kinds but also to a flood of Iraqi refugees following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent “purification” of Baghdad neighborhoods and towns and cities along the Shi’a/Sunni divide. As of this writing, there is little research on the effects of these transformations on Palestinian identity and sense of place.

These brief critical comments are inspired by Sayigh’s constant questioning of what kind of work research and writing ought to do. And it is in this spirit that we decided to seek out emerging and established scholars in a variety of disciplines who have been inspired by her work; who pursue lines of inquiry that she pioneered; and who do so with deep concern about the ethical, moral, and political responsibilities of the scholar. The immediate problem we faced in this regard was the embarrassment of riches. Within minutes, we came up with over thirty names, and this not to mention Sayigh’s many lifelong friends in the camps whose testimony as to how she impacted their lives and they hers are every bit as important to share on the pages of the journal.

The best way of honoring such a self-effacing scholar, we wrote in our letters of invitation, was for contributors to introduce original research inspired by her example instead of reviewing her work and sharing accolades and vignettes. We asked potential contributors, therefore, to submit specific case studies based on ethnographic research, and to locate them within a larger context of theoretical, historical, and political concerns. The response to our invitation

was such that our greatest challenge was to choose only four articles,² in addition to the interview with Rosemary by Mayssun Soukarieh and this jointly penned introduction.³

Not surprisingly, all the contributors—Diana Allan, Falestin Nâili, Penny Johnson, and Stéphanie Latte Abdallah—are women writing primarily about women. All, especially Johnson and Allan, are struggling with the same dilemma that has bedeviled Sayigh over the past four decades. As she states in her interview, “I find it very difficult to untangle control of women, which I oppose, from a continuity of political identity, which I support.”⁴ This dilemma, typical in anticolonial struggles, is all the more difficult in the Palestinian case because of Israel’s relentless campaigns of political and discursive erasure; the unbroken chain of defeats over five generations; and the repeated traumas of dislocation, dispossession, and violence. For the Palestinian residents of refugee camps in Lebanon, choice is a rare commodity. The self and the political are entangled in ways that render meaningless the binaries, such as public/private, that scholars trade in.

Each of the articles explores new approaches and lines of inquiry in dealing with this dilemma. Each also covers a different region and type of community. Yet, Rosemary’s profound influence permeates the pages and is a testimony to her extraordinary contributions over the past forty years. If being a Palestinian is essentially a political choice, then Rosemary Sayigh is Palestinian to the core and an example to us all.

Beshara Doumani
Mayssun Soukarieh

NOTES

1. Rosemary Sayigh, “Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement: A Web-based Oral History” (unpublished article).

2. It is our hope that the full range of contributions will appear elsewhere.

3. We would like to take the opportunity here to thank Laurie King-Irani—managing editor of *JPS* when this special issue was put together—for the many pages of highly informed comments she generated on each essay, and the

indefatigable Linda Butler for her detailed editorial comments. Along with our own comments and those of anonymous readers, the articles in this issue received a tough and thorough vetting that must have severely tested the patience of the contributors. We thank them for being such good sports about it. We would also like to thank Muhammad Ali Khalidi and Diane Riskedahl for their help in the initial step of this project.

4. Interview with Mayssun Soukarieh.

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