

INTERVIEW GUIDE

TALKING WITH PALESTINIAN ELDERS



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with appreciation to Professor
Nadine Naber for her advice on
conducting interviews

Why Document?

The Palestinian people and their experiences are diverse. Our elders can provide a wealth of information about Palestinian culture, history, traditions, foods, and celebrations, but also on the losses and struggles our people continue to face.

These pieces of history comprise our collective experience as Palestinians and help develop a deeper understanding of our past, our present, and our identity.

Preservation of social history, or the history of daily life, teaches us about how the bigger political and economic events happening in Palestine impacted the day-to-day experiences of Palestinians. Your elders were part of this history and by documenting their stories, you help contribute to how we understand Palestinian social history. By asking about the daily life of your elders, you will learn about the historic Palestinian economy, how people survived and lived off of the land, what they ate, how they dressed, and what traditions and celebrations they had- and why. You will be fascinated by their stories, and how vibrant cultural life was in Palestine, and how Palestinians worldwide have resisted their circumstances by maintaining our traditions and works of cultural production today.

Planning and Conducting an Interview

Think about questions you would like to ask in advance. You should tell your interviewee why exactly you want to interview them, and why it is meaningful to you. When conducting an interview, you will want to explain why you are interviewing your elders, why it is important for you to have this knowledge, and what you plan to do with the information shared in the interview. Often times, interviewees will say that the details of their daily life in Palestine were not important, so you should explain in advance why this information is necessary for future generations of Palestinians to remember.

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Some Palestinian activists and researchers have taken it upon themselves to interview Nakba survivors and other Palestinian elders on their experiences, and how the Nakba impacts their lives: whether it caused them to eventually live under Israeli occupation in the West Bank, under siege in Gaza, as a second-class citizen in Israel, or as part of the global Palestinian diaspora, where they might have lived in Palestinian refugee camp in a neighboring Arab country, or as part of one of the growing Palestinian communities in the United States. You might also like to interview your elders on these issues.

You will want to know about several dimensions to their experience, all of which probably cannot be covered in just one conversation. If they suffered from ethnic cleansing, you might ask them about those events.

You might also want to ask about life after the Nakba. What happened to their family after the Nakba? How did life change? What struggles did they face? If they were forcibly removed from Palestine, you can ask about their refugee experience. If your elders now live in the United States, you can also ask about what it means to be Palestinian in diaspora, and what their journey was like.



Planning and Conducting the Interview, continued

You will either take notes during the interview or do an audio/video recording. If you choose to record the meeting, you should ask for permission from your interviewee first. If you take notes, be sure to make eye contact when asking questions, and as much as possible throughout the interview.

Some of their recollections will be pleasant ones, they will remember celebrations, games they played as a child, happy memories with loved ones, and so on.

We also know that when discussing sensitive topics such as the Nakba, ethnic cleansing, life as a refugee, or other difficult issues will bring up traumatic memories. This should be handled with kindness and awareness of how difficult it can be to discuss these moments in one's life. If you ask about these moments, and your interviewee expresses unwillingness to discuss the details, do not press the issue. Some people will be comfortable opening up, but others will not, and that should be respected. If they are willing to discuss this trauma, but become emotional at any point, be supportive. You can either stop discussing that particular issue, or let them know you can take a break and return to it later. Be present with them, even if they need to be silent.



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The End Product

There are many possibilities for how you can use the interview from your elders. It is important for one's family history, but you can also use it to teach others as well. If you choose to make something to share with the world based off of your interview(s), always be sure to ask for permission from your interviewees first.

It can be useful for your studies, especially if you are interested in writing about Palestinian history.

If you are an artist, this information might be useful for a play, a future film or documentary, or other forms of visual art inspired by the experiences of your elder. One example of a documentary that uses oral testimony is the 1998 film produced by AFSC, *Collecting Stories from Exile*.

If you are a writer, you might write a work of fiction based off of these events, or write a poem or short story dedicated to your elder. You can also write a blog post based off of these stories (with permission). In 2012, Nadine Liddawi wrote a piece called "Teita's Memories: Reliving the Nakba" based off of her grandmother's stories as told in an interview for the blog *Beyond Compromise*.

There are a plethora of uses for an interview, but most importantly, it is an opportunity for us to show our Palestinian elders, whether they are parents, grandparents, relatives, family friends, or mentors, that their experience and wisdom is valued to Palestinian youth. Above all, it is an opportunity for us to thank our elders for all that they have done for us.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

There are endless possible questions to ask your elders. Below are some sample questions you can use, but it is by no means an exhaustive list. If you read Arabic, the website *Palestine Remembered* also published an interview guide with sample questions you can use.

Pre-Nakba questions:

Where are you from in Palestine? What village/city? District?

How old were you when the nakba/naksa/you fled Palestine?

What was life like in Palestine? Do you remember it well? What did an average day look like?

Can you describe what your village looked like?

How many people lived there?

How did people make their living? Did they live off of the land? Were they farmers? What did they grow?

Was there a house of worship in your village? What was religious life like? How did people commemorate religious holidays?

Were there important festivals? How were holidays celebrated? How were weddings celebrated?

Was there a school? What kind of a school? Who went to school?

What was life like for children? What were their responsibilities? What games did children play?

Where did the teachers come from?

Was there a hospital nearby?

What villages were nearby to yours? Are any of them still present today? What do you remember about those villages? Did you ever visit them?

Did you/your parents/community suspect something like this (ethnic cleansing) would happen? Did anyone ever fear this as a possibility?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Post-Nakba Questions:

When were you forced to flee?

Where did you flee to?

(If they did not flee): What was growing up like in Palestine after the Nakba?

(If they were ethnically cleansed): What was it like growing up in a refugee camp? Or, what was it like growing up in exile?

How long did you spend there before arriving in the United States?

Did you go to school in a refugee camp?

Palestinian life in the United States:

Why did you choose to come to the US?

What was the Palestinian community like when you first arrived in the US?

Did you live near other Palestinians?

Do you feel that Palestinian identity was strong in your first years in the US? Why or why not?

Did people feel comfortable expressing their identity as Palestinians or their opinions on Palestine?

Were you involved in activism or community activities?

What does the Nakba mean to you today?

What does it mean to be Palestinian in diaspora?



Other sources:

www.nakbafiles.org

www.palestineremembered.com