

Editorial

Kais M. Firro*

This issue of *Jadal* reflects on the importance of oral testimonies in the writing of Palestinian history. There is no doubt that oral history continues to be an area of debate and that some historians still reject its legitimate contribution on the grounds that it falls short of documentary history based on written testimonies. This discussion has not led, however, to the development of knowledge that confirm that testimonies described and transmitted orally represent the past as it was and that the event described in documents and pictures and in oral testimonies is the same event as it was when it occurred. Debate remains, then, about the difference between the methodologies used in oral history and those used in documentary history, as well as regarding the objectives of each. Oral history has special goals that documentary history is, in many cases, unable to achieve. Oftentimes, for example, documentary historians resort to oral testimonies to confirm or refute written testimonies. It is noteworthy that the objection to oral history carries with it ideological dimensions: the majority of its opponents belong to dominant groups and peoples, while the majority of its defenders represent marginalized groups and peoples.

This issue of *Jadal* comprises four articles that treat the subject of Palestinian oral history from several aspects. The first is my article, which deals with three main themes: (1) a brief presentation of the theoretical aspect as expounded by some of the most prominent specialists in oral history, compared with documentary history, and connecting this to Palestinian oral history; (2) addressing the general rules that collectors of oral testimonies adhere to and how they are used in historical writing in order to take advantage of them in Palestinian oral history; and (3) the stances taken on various sides of the heated debate between, on the one hand, the Zionist vision that denies the credibility and ability of Palestinian oral history to present a narrative that

rivals the Zionist narrative, and on the other hand, and the Palestinian vision's defense of it, presenting examples of deliberate errors in Zionist documentary history.

In the second article, Professor Mustafa Kabha addresses the necessity of using oral testimonies in the writing of Palestinian history. The process of destruction suffered by Palestinian cultural heritage—including the archives of political and cultural institutions as well as public and private libraries—has made oral history even more important to maintaining a sense of collective identity. Professor Kabha reviews Palestinian projects undertaken to collect oral testimonies, reaching the conclusion that these projects would benefit from three basic conditions: adherence to the methodology of oral history; full coordination between them to prevent repetition; and the identification of priorities in the collection of narratives from those of advanced age.

The third article, written by Himmat Zu'bi, discusses the importance of women's testimonies in oral history. She briefly presents the reasons for women's marginalization in traditional historical writing and the development of modern feminist history, arguing that this development took place in two stages. Despite the presentation in the first stage of new information about women, it did not manage to change their marginal status. This change took place in the second stage, when feminist history drew from modern curricula and used oral history as an important source in the writing of women's history. Oral history provided, in the author's view, the ability to give expression to personal, gender, and class differences in Palestinian society. Women were, through their testimonies, able to close many gaps in our history, allowing for the integration of women's and men's experiences in this history.

Finally, Wadeaa Awawdy's article is a call for the use of oral history: "Lest We Lose Memory." Oral testimonies have become a cornerstone in the maintenance of Palestinians' identity and in the forging of collective memory. In this, they are like many oppressed groups and peoples. In light of the reality of dispossession and dispersal, grandmothers and mothers were able to weave, through spontaneous oral narratives of Palestinian life in the traditional Palestinian village, a narrative of place into the consciousness of generations born far from their homes and their homeland. They thus

allowed those individuals to get a sense for the houses and neighborhoods, threshing floors and orchards and fields, the harvest seasons, and weddings and popular celebrations. In order to keep this awareness vibrant and alive, Awawdy argues that it is necessary to transform spontaneous narratives into testimonies organized according to the professional principles of oral history.

* **Kais M. Firro** is a Professor Emeritus of Middle East history and the director of Mada al-Carmel's history program.