

ESSAY



The Bseiso Family Archive: Ongoing Nakba and the Road to Reparations

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of the ongoing genocide of the Palestinians of Gaza, this essay tells the story of one branch of the Bseiso family, a prominent family of southern Palestine. In a moving personal reflection on his family history and his own life, the author recounts the story of his grandfather, Mahrous Mustafa Bseiso, a key figure in Bi'r al-Sabe' (Beersheba) during the first half of the twentieth century. Against this backdrop, the author narrates how he came to found the Bseiso Family Archive, a digital archive that challenges misconceptions of the Palestinian people while also preserving Palestinian history from erasure.

KEYWORDS

Palestine; Gaza; refugees; genocide; ethnic cleansing; *tapu or tabu*; diaspora; Nakba; archives; landowners

MY NAME IS ADEL JAWDAT BSEISO, AND I AM A PALESTINIAN. I was born in the Palestinian town of al-Bireh, and for the last fifty-two years, I have lived in the United States, where I built a life, raised a family, and pursued a career. Yet, no matter how far I have traveled or how much time has passed, the legacy of my family's story, our loss, our dignity, our fight to preserve the truth, continue to shape my life.



Figure 1. This is a picture of Adel Bseiso and his family from 1965 in Ramallah. From left to right: His brother, Jamal, and mother, Rewadia, with his younger brother, Samer, on her lap. In the back is his older sister, Nabila. His older brother, Sami, is standing next to him and their father, Jawdat, with the author on his father's lap. His sister, Salwa, is sitting between his mother and father.

SOURCE: Photo courtesy of the author.

My family's history, like that of so many Palestinians, changed irreversibly on May 15, 1948. On that day, my family, including my father, Jawdat Mahrous Bseiso, and my grandfather, Mahrous Mustafa Bseiso, were expelled from their home in Bi'r al-Sabe' (Beersheba). Overnight, they went from being among the largest landowners in southern Palestine to stateless refugees. Our properties—thousands of dunams of prime agricultural and urban land—were forcibly seized by the new Israeli state.

This is not a claim or opinion. It is a documented fact, backed by original land deeds, Ottoman and British tax receipts, and court-registered property transfers meticulously preserved by my family for over a century. My grandfather, Mahrous Bseiso, was a respected businessperson and civic leader. Beginning in 1906, at the invitation of Ottoman authorities, he purchased 4,400 dunams of land, eventually expanding his holdings to tens of thousands more. He acquired land from both private owners and the Ottoman government, and he helped fellow Palestinians register their holdings under the Ottoman *tapu* (*tabu*) system and, after Britain's occupation of Palestine in late 1917 and the subsequent dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, under British Mandate law. He paid taxes and respected the rule of law, believing—mistakenly—that doing so would protect his rights.

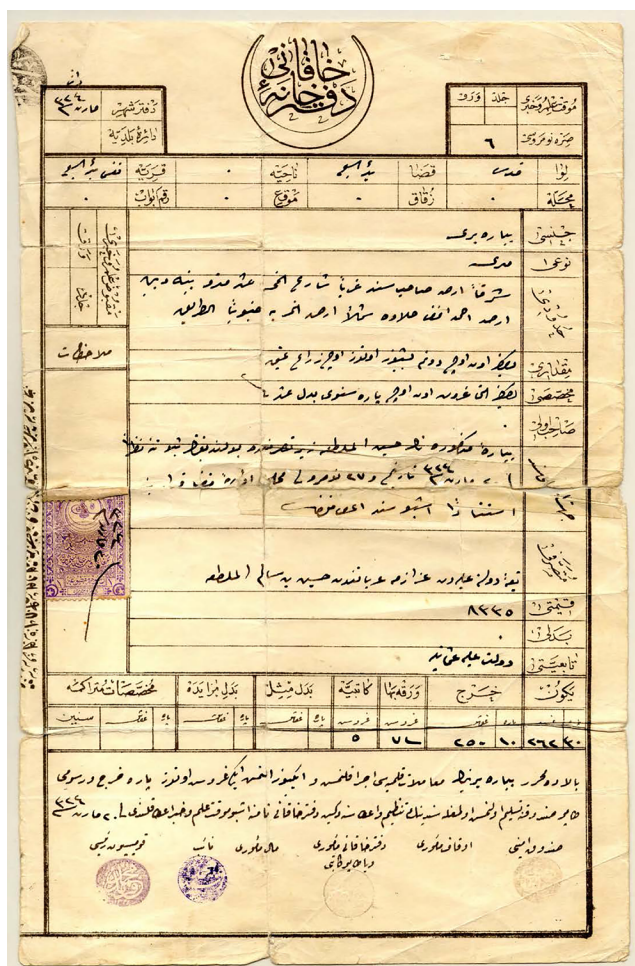


Figure 2. This is a land deed from 1906 that indicates the ownership of land in Bi'r al-Sabe' by the Bseiso family. SOURCE: Photo courtesy of the author and the BFA.¹

of rebuilding, the future they hoped to pass down. We were not absentees. We were there and we were forced out.

As we mark the seventy-seventh anniversary of the Nakba, the global conversation is finally shifting. Millions now march for Palestine. Palestinian self-determination is on many states' docket. A tipping point—a black swan event—is approaching, when the weight of truth may finally bend the arc of history toward justice. In the midst of this, I recount my family's history of loss, dispossession, and refugeehood. I recount the story of the Bseiso Family Archive (BFA), a digital archive I founded to tell my family story through our documents. As a record of our family's existence on the land, the archive challenges misconceptions about the Palestinian people while also preserving our history from erasure amid genocide. The archive is the living memory of our family and, in many ways, of Palestine itself. Our story is not exceptional, it is emblematic. That is why I chose to digitize it and make it public.

The Ongoing Nakba: Gaza and Beyond

The Nakba was not a singular event, but an ongoing and deliberate process of dispossession and ethnic cleansing that began well before the Zionist state was founded in May 1948. As early as the 1930s, Zionists were systematically plotting the transfer of Palestinians from the land.⁴ These schemes culminated in Plan Dalet,⁵ a three-week operation launched on April 1, 1948,⁶ that orchestrated the expulsion of Palestinians from hundreds of towns and villages across Palestine. Hundreds of thousands of these dispossessed Palestinians would be internally displaced within the borders of historic Palestine. Gaza is an example of this Zionist scheme. Throughout the Nakba, Gaza absorbed nearly two-hundred-thousand displaced Palestinians, most of whom remain, to this day, in refugee camps in the besieged enclave. As a result, the vibrant, ancient coastal region was transformed into a series of densely populated refugee camps, home to over two million Palestinians who have been enduring economic strangulation, siege, and relentless Israeli bombardment for nearly two decades. Israel's genocidal war on Gaza today represents a continuation of the Nakba's objectives—to erase Palestinian presence and sever them from their land and history.



Figure 4. This is a photo of Bi'r al-Sabe' in 1948 before the Israelis forcibly took it.
SOURCE: Photo courtesy of the author and the BFA.⁷

My father was twenty-three when the Nakba shattered his world. As Mahrous Bseiso's favored son, he had been groomed to inherit a vast and thriving enterprise. Before 1948, Bi'r al-Sabe' was a Palestinian city that was home to Muslims, Christians, and Jews. My grandfather helped shape its economy by developing farms, building homes, operating mills, and transforming the desert into fertile land. Following the Nakba, he and my father spent the last twenty years of his life in exile, knocking on closed doors, hiring lawyers, and pleading with authorities for the internationally protected right to return. My grandfather was continuously denied. He died shortly after the 1967 war, heartbroken, never having set foot again on the land he had cultivated with such vision and care.



Figure 5. This is a photo of what the Bseiso's land looks like today, developed by Israelis.
SOURCE: Photo courtesy of the author and the BFA.⁸

Silence and Pain Across Generations

My father rarely spoke of Bi'r al-Sabe' or the past. The silence was heavy, born not of forgetfulness but of pain. For years, I sensed a history hidden under layers of loss. The trauma of displacement ran so deep that he chose silence over storytelling, exile over memory. He sold what little remained, moved us to the United States, and buried the past. Like many Palestinian refugees, he did not want his children to grow up chained to heartbreak.

I was born Adel in Palestine, but in the United States, I became Eddie, then Edvardo, and eventually Vardo. I thought my Palestinianness would be easier to hide. It was not. The truth finds its way back to you. For me, it came through these documents, these memories, this sense of duty. What began as a personal reckoning became a collective cause.

In the early 1990s, my father and I rekindled our relationship. We began communicating more, and he started to recognize my accomplishments, something that meant the world to me. He often told me I reminded him of his father. One day, he asked if we could visit in person, saying he had something particularly important to share. A week later, I arrived at his home in southern California. After dinner, he asked me to walk outside for coffee with him. For hours, he opened up about the past, detailing what had happened before and after the Nakba, sharing stories of my grandfather, his achievements, and the vast amount of land lost on May 15, 1948. I could see the sadness in his eyes as he recounted our family history. The stories were both profound and devastating. I sat there in silence, fascinated and horrified.

After what felt like days rather than hours, we returned inside. He handed me a brown paper bag filled with documents wrapped in rubber bands and covered in dust. "These are the surviving documents of our family land," he said, "They are in your hands now. Trust no one. Be careful who you share them with. The future of this family is in your hands. Do the right thing. Never let them forget who we are and where we come from. Honor your grandfather's accomplishments and help as many Palestinian refugees as you can."

Over the next eight years, I documented the oral history that my father and other family members shared in vivid detail. My father passed away in 2001, and I promised him I would honor his request. That commitment ultimately led me to create the BFA in 2022.

From Personal Reckoning to Collective Cause

As I grew older, the need to understand what had happened to my family in Palestine became a quiet obsession. My journey began not in protest but in preservation—an effort to collect, verify, and archive what remained: documents, contracts, correspondences, and oral histories that told the real story. I founded the BFA to honor my grandfather's legacy, assert our truth, and preserve it for future generations.

At first, I worked quietly, digitizing and translating records, consulting historians and legal experts, tracking maps, and reconstructing the history of our land parcel by parcel. Over time, I realized that what I held was not only a family legacy, but something larger: a repository of truth and justice that could contribute to the Palestinian historical and legal record. The BFA offers a window into a time many assume never existed, a time when Palestinian society thrived. The archive includes Ottoman *tapu* documents, British Mandate tax records, maps, and legal correspondences that establish our rightful ownership of thousands of dunams of land in Bi'r al-Sabe', and that contribute to refuting myths that the land was not inhabited, or

that Palestinians sold their land and abandoned their homes. These materials do not just tell a story; they provide evidence for how Palestinians like my grandfather abided by the legal systems of two empires, Ottoman and British, only to be dispossessed by a third.

This work is thus not about nostalgia, but about justice. And in recent years, it has taken on a broader mission: to humanize Palestinians, move beyond propaganda and stereotype, and assert our place in history—not just as victims, but as people with dignity, land, and history and law on our side. I dream of building a digital portal where any Palestinian, from Gaza to the diaspora, can upload their own records, stories, and testimonials. I want to help others document their histories and preserve them. If we can prove one case, we can prove a thousand. The key is focus, collaboration, and relentless attention to detail.

In this vein, the BFA welcomes all contributions from Palestinians worldwide—small parcels, forgotten photos, tax slips, oral testimonies, and so on. All submissions to the archive matter in the collective mosaic of Palestinian historical presence. The goal is to democratize archival access and turn private memory into public record.⁹ If thousands of families uploaded their records and cross-referenced cadastral maps, we could reconstruct a grassroots cartography of Palestine—one that affirms ownership and refutes official denials. This vision requires technical, legal, and community collaboration, but the foundations are already being laid. The more we educate, the stronger our case becomes. Our archive is not just a collection of papers—it is a curriculum, a foundation for historical, legal, and political research that can shape a future rooted in equity and accountability.

Today, the BFA is recognized as the largest documented collection of pre-Nakba land ownership by a single Palestinian family. In 2023, after years of collaboration, Columbia University formally integrated our collection into its Digital Library Collection.¹⁰ In 2025, we launched BFArchive.org, providing open access to scholars, journalists, and the public. Beyond Columbia, the BFA is now affiliated with the Palestinian Museum, which will host a digital branch of our archive. We are building partnerships with scholars, students, and institutions to bring these materials into classrooms and courtrooms alike. The goal is to turn memory into movement—not just to look back, but to forge a road forward.

Toward Recognition and Justice

This project is about reclaiming our history. The road to reparation begins with recognition. It starts with telling the truth, fully, publicly, and with courage. That is what the Bseiso Family Archive stands for. That is the legacy I carry.

The documents we possess are proof that Palestinians were not passive bystanders to history. We were landowners, farmers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, scientists, businesspeople, and more. We built homes, paid taxes, recorded deeds, and followed the law. We were dispossessed and forced into exile. Each document in the BFA, whether written in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, English, or Hebrew, is a testament to that erased reality. Some are frayed with age, others smudged by fingerprint evidence of people who lived, worked, invested, and believed in a future taken from them. These papers survived when so much else did not. They carry the hopes and heartbreak of generations.

Through this work, I have come to understand that the value of land is held in its memory and identity. That is why Israel's erasure of Palestinian land ownership is so devastating; it is the theft of material and memory. They took our land and then tried to retell the story without us in it. The BFA is our refusal in not letting that happen.

I did not choose to become an archivist. This role was passed to me by the quiet grief of my father and the stubborn diligence of my grandfather. In preserving and sharing our records, I am fulfilling a promise they could not. This archive is not just about the past, it is a commitment to future generations, Palestinian and otherwise, who deserve to know the truth. It is also not a closed chapter, but a living case. The lands we owned were never sold, never compensated for, and never forgotten. Though the so-called Custodian of Absentees' Properties still holds them, our right to return, restitution, and compensation remains. Justice is patient. The road to reparations may be long, but it begins with the refusal to forget.

We survived Nakba. We lost the land, but not the legacy. And now, with this archive, we turn memory into evidence, and evidence into justice. That is our right. That is our duty. This is the road to reparations. I want my children, and all Palestinian children, to know that their past is not a rumor or a myth. It is real, documented, and undeniable. I want the world to see what was taken and from whom it was taken.

Our family archive is a call to action for Palestinians to recover and protect their own histories and for the world to reckon with the truth. We are not asking for sympathy. We are demanding recognition. The documents speak for themselves. All we ask is that they be read, not as relics of the past, but as building blocks of the future.

About the Author

Adel Bseiso is an audio-visual technology entrepreneur and founder of the Bseiso Family Archive. Born in Palestine and raised in the United States, Bseiso has produced gold, platinum, and double platinum records as a songwriter and music producer.

Endnotes

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8. Henrietta Szold St., Lot 38016, 2025, BFA, <https://bfarchive.org/archive/legal-opinion/gallery>. This page also provides other photos of the different parcels of land owned by the Bseiso's family and how they look today.
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