

WORLD ANTHROPOLOGY

Essay

Why Insaniyyat? A Society for Palestinian Anthropologists

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Insaniyyat, an association of Palestinian anthropologists, seeks to advance Palestinian anthropologists and anthropology. Its name, *Insaniyyat*, is a new way to say “anthropology” in Arabic. *Insan* means “person” or “human,” which in Arabic is contrasted to *jinn*, meaning “demonic.” It also emerges from the verb *anasa* meaning “offering affable company that dispels loneliness.” To be “human” is therefore to be a congenial companion. We combine *insan* with the suffix *iyat* to indicate a subject of study, hence *Insaniyyat*.

Insaniyyat thus stands for Palestinian anthropologists thinking and acting together. It offers a space to counter the physical and mental confinements of colonial presence, to perform our precarious duty to exist. In some ways, *Insaniyyat* has miraculously emerged out of a century of erasure and relentless fragmentation, ever since the Sykes-Picot Agreement and Balfour Declaration enabled the French, British, Zionists, and Americans to dissect and dominate our region. To choose to be active in *Insaniyyat* is thus to be and to act.

In *Insaniyyat*, we natives work to overcome our dissection and domination to find out how anthropology, in complex and contradictory ways, can bring us together and back to ourselves, bring us out of misrecognition, loneliness, and invisibility. It is a marvel how a discipline born within colonial conditions succeeds in coalescing dispersed Palestinian academics to stand in defiance of the fragmentation and dissipation of political will plaguing our homeland and region.

Insaniyyat is among the first Palestinian academic associations and the second professional association of Arabic-speaking anthropologists, after the Tunisian Association for Anthropology. It has been admitted as a member of the World Council of Anthropological Associations, although we have yet to reach out on a regional scale to partners in the Middle East or North Africa or to the Global South. Tellingly, we have connected with Palestinian anthropologists living in cities throughout the West, but in hardly any other locale outside of historic Palestine.

The state that has most direct power over our lives has made it nearly impossible for us to legally and practically come together, in contrast to the Israeli anthropological community, which is free to include residents of West Bank settlements alongside residents of Tel-Aviv, all enjoying equal

citizenship and mobility. And yet, we do manage to meet in body and mind—an anthropology association operated by a stateless people.

Recognizing the distance both Palestine and anthropology may be from stately knowledge, we ask if, and what kind of, compatibility and potency may exist in the coming together of anthropology (studying “the odd”) and Palestine (an oddity in a sovereignty-saturated global order), two types of exilic consciousness in our world. We are coming to understand how Palestine does not only belong to Palestinians; we do not mean just the land, but Palestine as a worldview. Palestine is an act belonging to anyone searching for roots out of rootlessness, for wholeness out of a fraying fabric of existence, and for a future, rather than resigning to futurelessness. *Insaniyyat* thus not only affords company for the intellect but also company in longing for restorative justice in the fullest sense.

Ultimately, the question of why we founded *Insaniyyat* may only reap answers over time, as reasons for participation vary along with our varied dispersal over many geographies. And yet, there was an idea and a moment when we first came together. In September 2015, some of us at Israeli universities simply wanted to speak anthropology in Arabic, so a few students and faculty began meeting monthly in Haifa to support each other’s work and debate in the language we count as home.

Initially, meetings focused on our own work, but the idea quickly grew that we should launch an association for all historic Palestine that would also include Palestinian anthropologists at Palestinian-run institutions. At that moment, our monthly meetings became split between discussions of anthropology and planning toward an anthropological association. We reached out to colleagues in the occupied West Bank and held a day-long symposium at Birzeit University in April 2016, which included panels on generations of anthropological research by Palestinians and on Palestine, as well as an organizational meeting.

Next, we reached out to Palestinians in the diaspora and held a three-day organizational development workshop in Jericho in January 2017, drawing twenty-five anthropologists from seven countries around the world. This workshop established working committees and an interim executive board. The Wenner-Gren Foundation provided generous funding, and the Palestinian American Research Council (PARC) provided invaluable logistical support. PARC has continued to be our valued ally and

supporter on multiple levels as we forge forward with our association.

November of that year saw the first panel organized exclusively by Insaniyyat members at the American Anthropology Association meeting, held in Washington, DC. In the panel, “Palestinian Ethnography at Home and in Diaspora,” four members presented papers on contemporary Palestinian lives in various geographies, addressing marriage, leisure, death, and living in the separation wall’s shadow. The following year’s AAA meeting in San Jose also had a panel organized by Insaniyyat members, this time on “Palestinian Sumoud: Limits and Possibilities.” Four panelists discussed how *sumoud*, variably translated as “steadfastness,” “perseverance,” “resilience,” and “resistance,” lives in the multiple ways Palestinians confront the presence of the Israeli state in their lives.

After two years of working toward Insaniyyat’s official establishment, we managed to finally legally incorporate in April 2019. Two months later, Insaniyyat’s second international three-day conference was held in Beit Jala on “Palestinian Anthropology: Thinking without a State,” drawing over sixty participants on our first day of open panels. The final day’s organizational meeting officially launched Insaniyyat as an association with the election of our first executive board and establishment of working committees.

Insaniyyat’s membership today totals seventy Palestinian and other anthropologists from around the world supported by an international advisory board of six leading anthropologists. We continue to organize panels at the AAA annual meeting. In November 2019, in Vancouver, four Insaniyyat members spoke at a panel on “Ethnographies of Palestinian Futures,” although two panelists could not attend, as they did not receive visas for travel to Canada in a timely manner. In the current COVID-19 moment, we have issued a call for papers on “Fieldnotes on Life in Pandemic Times” for publication on our website. “The Suq” project, another initiative, will erect ethnographic photographs and narratives about life in Palestine’s markets throughout the markets themselves. We are also beginning to contribute a column to the Palestinian youth monthly *Filasteen al-Shabab* and to identify key anthropological texts for translation into Arabic. We continue to meet monthly in Haifa, but as a scholarly reading group focusing on different themes each year, first on “sovereignty” and now on “ontology.” Organizational work now happens through our executive board and working committees.

We welcome all those interested to visit our website (insaniyyat.org) and to contact us and learn more about the various projects we have underway. We are interested in connecting to other anthropological associations and participating in joint endeavors.