

‘Everyone knew what was happening’: the paradoxes of state secrecy and its making

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British state secrecy continues to reflect the colonial past that shaped it

This article focuses on official means and practices related to state secrecy. In highlighting some of the tensions, paradoxes and continuing colonial characteristics of UK state secrecy practices, it calls into question understandings of secrecy associated with authoritarianism, as well as the alternatives posed as its antidotes. Instead, it looks at the more nuanced, subtle, collective, and contradictory ways in which authoritarianism is (re)produced, entrenched, and extended - primarily through a focus on state documentation. The article also cautions against narrow but sweeping understandings of authoritarianism; raises questions about the framings both of secrecy and its alternatives; and demands that we look at the colonial, racialised, class and gender dynamics involved in methods of covering/uncovering, hiding/revealing, and the making of state secrecy. It focuses on these questions to further reveal, and make understandable, the contradictions of state secrecy that are fundamental to British

Soundings

national security practices. At the same time, it attempts to harness histories, questionings, and alternatives, whilst considering ways to further undermine and eradicate colonial violence and the fragile foundations it relies on.

The article also notes that, in discourses around UK 'national security' practices, the term 'national' is itself deceiving, given that notions of security are inextricably bound to the colonial nature of the British state/empire - and therefore to all those the state seeks to disassociate with the nation - whether in the former colonies, in detention centres, prisons and refugee camps, and/or within the metropole. This piece is especially concerned with practices across spectacular, and therefore assumed-to-be extraordinarily visible, moments of British violence - while also acknowledging that this focus is narrow, and that the more banal, subtle and decoyed ways in which national security practices operate are crucial for a more accurate understanding of how secrecy functions and is constantly (un-/re-)made.¹

The focus on state documentation does not aim to exalt either the state or written documentation as sources/forms of knowledge; rather, it seeks to contribute to processes of understanding and unravelling British state practices by attending to 'official' narratives. It should also be said that the impossibility of separating the nature of the British state from its colonial roots and ongoing imperial project(s) means that many of the points raised in this article concern practices that are not restricted to the British government. Whilst the questions, practices and understandings around state secrecy and its mobilisations discussed here are uniquely concerned with the nature and history of the British state, they are not limited by it. The article engages with practices used by, passed down to, borrowed from, transferred from, and experimented with alongside, the many lethal partners that share the British state's murderous ideologies, histories, and practices. It is impossible not to see the practices described in this piece in the context of the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people, which is uniquely horrific in its visibility, and is accompanied by the continuous but failing secrecy practices of the Zionist entity and its genocidal partners.²

The article draws from a range of different but extending 'episodes' of British state violence, and the state secrecy practices associated with them. Specifically, it looks at British state practices around the destruction and removal of documents that detailed British colonial violence (specifically the 'migrated archives') in the period of 'decolonisation'/'independence'. But it also looks at the war crimes

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

committed by British Special Forces in Afghanistan, and their cover up, which have more recently been in the public eye, given the ongoing Independent Inquiry Relating to Afghanistan, launched at the end of 2022. At the heart of this inquiry has been the murder of 80 Afghans during night raids from 2011 to 2013 by three units in the SAS, including children: in one case ‘there were two toddlers shot in their bed next to their parents’.³ The article also discusses the practices of secrecy of the British state arising from its collusion with loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Finally, it points to the clear parallels with current practices - which continue to be adopted and adapted - associated with British collusion in the genocide in Gaza.

This intervention has been written during times when lies, obfuscation, and concealment have accompanied the spectacular and visible violence of the latest iteration of Zionist genocidal onslaught on the Palestinian people, as well as the extreme criminalisation of those who have sought to acknowledge and resist it across the world.⁴ As Rabab Abdulhadi reminds us: ‘The ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza makes writing or engaging in any intellectual activities outside this context meaningless’.⁵ In the period during which this piece has been written, there have been continuous revelations and cover-ups, and a clear exposé of the contradictions involved in the visible nature of state secrecy. And - just as with the distracting and obfuscating effects of the practices described in this piece - the number and nature of ‘cover-ups’, scandals and revelations have contributed substantially to scattered, overwhelmed and incomplete reflections.

Contradictions of state secrecy and its meanings

The methods, meanings and representations of state secrecy are multiple. Historians, journalists, and activists have all written on the inherently exclusionary nature of secrecy. This section looks at the paradoxical ways in which state secrecy is deployed, including, importantly, the way it reproduces the inseparable dynamics of colonial, racialised and class power. Secrecy’s relationship with ‘Britishness’ (and the associations that come with this) is an integral part of these paradoxes, as is the state’s attitude to an authoritarianism that is commonly described or viewed as ‘foreign’. Ian Cobain writes of the positive/negative connotations of transparency/secretary, and their associations with Britishness: ‘transparency was a sure sign of British social and political progress. Secrecy, on the other hand, was not merely

Soundings

illiberal and unhealthy, it was, as Acton wrote, a “foreign” trait’.⁶ At the same time, Cobain describes the entrenched nature of secrecy in British society, and the positive connotations secrecy holds, as well as discussing *who* it is that is denoted in these positive representations. To elaborate on this further, it is worth addressing questions of *who* is worthy of and suited to practising secrecy, as well as *who* is worthy of being protected through the hidden nature of secrecy.

In a letter to his wife in 1841, the then Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, James Stephen, wrote of ‘the duty of silence’ - which he viewed as a Christian virtue, and one which was rarely being adhered to: this failure was plaguing their generation with sin.⁷ Similarly, a minute from another official, the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, Ralph Lingens, described who the practice of secrecy is reserved for: ‘The unauthorised use of official information is the worst fault a civil servant can commit. It is on the same footing as cowardice by a soldier. It is unprofessional’.⁸ Here, in contrast to the foreign, illiberal, and unhealthy associations attributed to secrecy by the likes of Acton, the duty of secrecy is reserved exclusively for those with Christian and gentleman-like values, and all that was/is associated with those terms, particularly in terms of class, gender and race. This culture of what Cobain describes as ‘honourable secrecy’ relied upon ‘the supposedly gentlemanly virtues of “discretion”, or “reserve” or “reticence” - all euphemisms for secrecy’.⁹

The exclusionary nature of secrecy necessarily requires those who know and those who don’t, and this (in/)visible knowing and contradiction is further amplified in times of spectacular violence. In describing the war crimes committed by British Special Forces (UKSF) deployed in Afghanistan on night raids, a member of the Special Forces admitted, ‘We all knew what was happening’.¹⁰ The use of ‘we’ here not only highlights the exclusionary nature of this coterie - within a case regarded as hidden; it also raises the question of the existence of the living witnesses and subjects of this violence who also hold knowledge - regardless of all the attempts to erase, suppress, or disparage (parts of) it.

In the case of the ‘migrated archives’ - documents looted and (re)moved to the UK at the time of so-called independence - the British government did not publicly acknowledge their existence until around a half-century after the files were stolen, under pressure brought by Mau Mau survivors and campaigners for justice. Tim Livsey described the files as an ‘open secret’, well-known to British officials.¹¹ A dual filing system had been in operation in the colonies, including a ‘watch system’ in

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

some cases, whereby certain files were marked, and were only to be accessed (seen, sorted, migrated, destroyed) by British officers of European descent, as part of a process that also concealed the removal and destruction of files.¹² In the case of Irish lawyer Pat Finucane’s murder, many declassified documents were stamped with ‘UK Eyes Only’;¹³ these documents were known to and circulated amongst British armed forces, but were never to be shared with even their police partners in Northern Ireland who were inseparable from British interests.¹⁴

In all these cases, secret files were open knowledge to those who were trusted; and, of course, the content of the files (and, at times, the existence of the files) was also known to those directly implicated in the practices documented.

Clearly, no matter the proximity, level of collaboration, and/or dedication and service provided to the British state and its projects of empire, race and racialisation always play a significant role in these processes. But ‘racialised secrecy’ also extended (and still extends) to questions of access - which connections, histories, and identities could grant greater knowledge and access to state documentation and archives.¹⁵ Livsey’s attention to the racialised elements of secrecy includes a discussion of access to the migrated archives for officials and researchers who had the aligned identities, connections and ties necessary for inclusion in the relevant coterie. More importantly, he exposes the lack of interest in questions and action around this ‘open secret’.¹⁶ Considering the ‘few willing to ask’, where was the interest about British violence in its colonies? Not only do racialised elements of state secrecy become evident in questions of access to the archives; they also reveal whose lives are seen as worth enquiring about and deserve attention, thereby feeding into the continuous (re-)production and upholding of racialised hierarchies.

These practices are in stark contrast to the government’s lack of engagement with the multiple terabytes of surveillance data collected by its own RAF surveillance flights, which have recorded thousands of hours of footage of the genocide in Gaza and have undoubtedly been an essential resource for the carrying out of the genocide.¹⁷ The Foreign Office has refused to demand, or even to request, access to ‘the biggest archive of this genocide’.¹⁸ Given the Foreign Office’s centrality in government decision-making related to the UK’s role in this genocide, including its arms export policy, compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and other supposed ‘oversight’ duties, such a refusal bluntly portrays what and who is actively (un)seen.

Soundings

Secrecy's relationship with, representations of, and making by, the British state all, then, entail these paradoxical elements. Secrecy was, and still is, attributed to un-British and 'foreign' traits when state interests suit. However, the paradoxes of the state's practices remain evident in the racialised foundations of its own state secrecy and the colonial relations that are reproduced throughout this racialised secrecy.

On making state secrecy

Whilst the representation of British state secrecy-making was based on masculinised, Christian, 'British' imagery, it also demanded the labour of those complexly (dis/) associated with these identities. This tension between representations of, and the making of, state secrecy is worth attending to: it prompts us to further elaborate on the questions posed above about *who* is worthy of practising and making secrecy - explicitly demanding that we think about *who* makes state secrecy as well as *how* it is made. Not only do such questions make it possible to problematise simplistic understandings of secrecy, including the supposed associations/alternatives linked to authoritarianism; they also allow insight into questions of access, and the unmaking of the violent practices that were (and still are) inseparable from the ongoing project of the British Empire. Making, destroying, and concealing the British Empire's practices was and is hard work, but there have always been tensions around the worthiness of accessing/making state secrecy with regard to some of the people willing to put in the hours and labour necessary for its existence - and these continue today. Such tensions were evident in worries about clerks who held the ungentlemanly characteristics of being from the lower classes. Doubts were expressed over whether they could be trusted, even whilst relying on their labour for the onerous work of legislation-related documentation concerned with state secrecy.¹⁹

The work entailed in the case of the migrated archives provides a glimpse into the necessary role of women in the making of state secrecy. One interesting story is mentioned at the start of David Anderson's article on Kenya's migrated archive.²⁰ Anderson describes an exchange at an Oxford royal wedding garden party, during which the wife of a British colonial officer (who he refers to as Mrs Pettigrew) casually admits to burning British files documenting colonial rule in Kenya. In an attempt at diverting attention away from the embarrassment caused by her husband's open frustration at the 2011 Mau Mau court case that had exposed British torture in Kenya - in which her husband's colleagues had been involved

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

- Mrs Pettigrew reveals her role in the destruction of colonial files. Anderson describes her attempt at a distraction:

She tells of spending her last weeks in employment during 1963 as a clerk at Nairobi’s Government House, taking bundles of documents onto the governor’s lawn and stuffing them into a burning brazier. The fires never ended, she exclaims with a laugh - as the British busily destroyed the archive of their colonial misadventure in Kenya.²¹

In 1965, a couple of years after ‘Mrs Pettigrew’ was lighting bonfires of files documenting British colonial violence in Kenya, two women clerks in Georgetown, British Guiana, were also working to burn and destroy violent histories of the British, ‘working alone, burning papers in a single forty-four gallon drum in the grounds of Government House’.²² A British official’s complaint to London described the difficulty of the processes for the two women clerks, Mrs Dalglish and Mrs Sutherland, who were required to sort, identify, and make destruction certificates, as well as ‘enduring the hot and wearing work of actually burning the files’.²³ This kind of role for women in making state secrecy was not reserved solely for the colonies, or the case of the migrated files. In the metropole, the work of women often involved difficult hours and tiresome labour similar to that of ‘factory workers, on three shifts a day: nine to six, four to midnight, midnight to nine’.²⁴ At Bletchley Park, the recruits were mostly women, despite the prevalent imagery of ‘pipe-smoking young men in tweed’, as ‘they were cheaper to employ and less likely to be required by the armed forces’.²⁵

Recruitment to MI6’s Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park exposed some of the contradictions in the representations and making of state secrecy: there was no initial official vetting, decisions being made instead on the way in which recruits spoke English, and the school they had gone to. These were regarded as sufficiently demonstrative of their reliability.²⁶ Small insights such as these shed light on some of the paradoxes of secrecy, and the kinds of identities required, trusted, and mobilised for the (un-/re-)making of British history.

Feminist and decolonial methodologies that call for a more thorough questioning of *who* can provide a more expansive understanding of power in the making of secrecy, as well as drawing attention to the often-dismissed nodes and people who were/are essential to secrecy’s infrastructure and processes.

Soundings

Methods of making state secrecy

In the following section, I delve into some of the processes involved in making British state secrecy, as well as its continuations and adaptations, and the continuous role of experimentation.

From drowning documents to digital destruction: Operation Legacy and legacy servers

One of the most spectacular practices of state secrecy is the destruction, erasure and elimination of documentation and evidence. This destruction highlights the grandiose scale at which secrecy is sometimes conducted and made, even while its operations are kept secret. Operation Legacy - the name given to the whole process of 'migrating' and destroying colonial files - involved British forces burning and sinking thousands of documents relating to their violent practices across the British empire. These spectacular and very visible forms of destruction in many cases demanded long, tedious, well-planned, and documented means of destruction - a documentation of the destruction of documentation. In the case of the destruction of colonial files in Malaya, five (civilian-style) lorries carried category A papers to a naval base in Singapore, where they were set ablaze.²⁷ The process of destruction took twenty months and involved a combination of different security branches and actors, including the Security Service (MI5) and Security Liaison Officers (SLOs). In other cases, there was much less time to adhere to British guidance on filtering documents, due to the terms on which independence and decolonisation happened. Anderson describes the scenes in Aden, where meticulous sifting and sorting had not been an option, in light of Yemeni resistance that had taken the British by surprise:

In the British colony of Aden, where departure came precipitously in 1967, amid an insurrection that did not allow civil servants the time to sift and sort their papers, every document in the Governor's Office was heaved onto a huge bonfire that was still smouldering as the Governor and his staff escaped to their waiting aeroplane. The conflagration was filmed for posterity by a home-movie buff.²⁸

Whilst such processes of erasure and elimination were evident in pre-'independence'

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

periods, they were in no way restricted to those times. In 1990, in the early stages of the first investigation of the Stevens Inquiry (focused on British state collusion with loyalist paramilitaries in murders committed in Northern Ireland), there was a fire in the inquiry’s incident room, which was full of equipment and documents.²⁹ The incident room was inside the Royal Ulster Constabulary’s Seapark facility, ‘one of the most secure policing facilities anywhere in the world’, but it was set ablaze, with phone lines cut and fire alarms disabled, convincing Stevens that the cause of this attempt at destruction was the British Army’s Force Research Unit (‘the FRU’) ‘that worked closely with MI5 and Special Branch, the intelligence wing of the RUC’.³⁰

Destruction of material has also evolved over time however, and whilst, at times, its processes may change, its essence remains. Processes of erasure have been adopted by government ministers in more recent times - for example in the use of WhatsApp auto-delete features during the pandemic.³¹ Similarly, state employees, including of bodies like the European Commission, have attempted justifying ‘not holding information’ in response to freedom of information requests by adopting an internal policy of deleting communications.

The erasure and elimination of documentation can also be seen in much more haunting ways as a result of continuing British colonial violence. The ongoing Independent Inquiry Relating to Afghanistan, investigating war crimes committed by British Special Forces (UKSF) in Afghanistan, has further revealed practices that are painfully similar to the destruction of evidence of British violence in the former colonies. After concerns were raised about war crimes committed on night raids (in one case involving emails exchanged detailing tactics³²), the Royal Military Police (RMP) had sought to retrieve essential forensic evidence from British Special Forces. But two weeks prior to the RMP’s visit, a programme named SDelete had been run on the server that they sought to seize. Despite reassurances from a year earlier, made by UKSF, that no amendments or modifications would be made, the application of the SDelete programme ensured that all previously deleted files were permanently deleted and made inaccessible, through a process that replaced the content of files with zeros. Such was the extent of this deletion that the RMP claimed it was impossible even to identify what had been removed.³³ Contractors involved in the migration of files from servers (during which process the SDelete programme was adopted) claimed in their witness statements, however, that alternative modes of auditing for those files must exist, and that SDelete had only been run with the

Soundings

explicit approval of UKSF officials.

Beyond the erasure of evidence on digital files and the accompanied reporting, the paradoxically detailed documentation of erased/unknown practices was evident elsewhere. For example, kill lists were drawn up by Special Forces squadrons: 'The squadron was keeping count of how many people were killed. Certain people in the squadron would keep count of how many they'd personally kill as well'.³⁴ Kill tallies were also a feature of the SAS in Iraq.³⁵ These practices were nothing new and had colonial roots, as seen for example in the recording of killings of Mau Mau 'terrorists' in Kenya. In a (very short) parliamentary debate in July 1953 that discussed British violence in Kenya and its shoot to kill policy, the then-MP for Northampton Reginald Paget asked the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Oliver Lyttelton, a question about Sidney ('Davo') Davidson, 'a Kenya Government officer seconded to the police force': 'Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Mr. Davidson is reported to have killed 33 terrorists, which are notched on his automatic rifle and .45 revolver? Can he also throw any light on this report?'.³⁶ Further evidence of kill tallies is found in counterinsurgency literature: in one example, a settler justifies allowing 'the boys to cut a tally of their kills on my verandah rail', given his knowledge of 'how "filthy and abominable" the Mau Mau were'.³⁷

Making secrecy through non-documentation

As well as erasure and destruction, there is also the question of the *non*-documenting of practices. Night raids conducted by Special Forces in Afghanistan were supposed to be filmed, but when Johnny Mercer, the ex-Minister of State for Veterans' Affairs, asked the director of the SAS if he could review the full-motion videos of night raids with which the inquiry was concerned, he was met with a shrug and told 'It isn't available, Johnny'.³⁸ However, one of Mercer's witness statements to the inquiry indicated a degree of scepticism about the non-existence of these videos, as well as alternative means and places in which these videos could be held.³⁹ Questions of data storage and retention in the making of secrecy are also part of the ongoing discussion around RAF surveillance footage gathered as a critical part of the ongoing genocide in Gaza.⁴⁰ These practices raise multiple points on how secrecy is made through *non*-documenting, and the ensuing erasure of accountability, as well as the implicit denial of the value of the lives taken.

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

In his witness statement at the Gaza Tribunal, Mark Smith, a former official at the Foreign Office who was leading the report on UK arms export licensing and the legal compliance of government, described in haunting detail the Foreign Office’s approach of ensuring communications took place in face-to-face conversations.⁴¹ Smith described the thousands of conversations that had happened within Foreign Office walls on the most controversial parts of UK arms export policy, which could never be accessed by the public or court (even closed court); and he described how a meeting with a senior director in the Foreign Office to discuss the issues he’d raised was only secured after months of being refused, and on the basis that it was verbal.⁴² He also reported on the anger he was met with by legal advisors in the department, both for questioning the Foreign Office’s approach, and justifications that he knew not to be true, and for conveying these related concerns about lies from the Foreign Office in writing.⁴³ A commitment to non-documentation is of course not a new state practice. Cobain, for example, describes how in earlier times ‘taking minutes of [the Cabinet’s] meetings was strictly forbidden’: no records of Cabinet meetings were kept until the Cabinet Secretariat was established in 1916.⁴⁴

The cases described above not only raise questions about how secrecy is made through practices of erasure, destruction, and non-documentation; they also, as is the case with archives, illustrate that secrecy is ‘living’, and therefore show the potential for its operation to be revealed, transformed, adapted, experimented with, and contradicted.⁴⁵

Obstruction and fragmentation as a means to conceal and control

The making of state secrecy also demands a co-ordinated fragmentation. The fragmentation of people, bodies, and documents disperses documentation and conceals practices; and it provides methods of justification that make documents, processes, and evidence both incomprehensible and inaccessible. As with other parts of the infrastructure of state secrecy, this process is crucial for avoiding accountability. The very way information is held sheds light on this. In the context of the migrated archives, the issue of where the archives were held (i.e., whether in the Foreign Office or at the Public Records Office (which later became known as the National Archives)) was a key element of the government’s justification their non-release (the files were held at the Foreign Office). This suggested separation between the Foreign Office and the Public Records Office, however, not only allowed, or

Soundings

justified, the concealment of the archives; it also concealed the co-ordinated process of concealment that saw the Foreign Office and the Public Records Office regularly communicate with one another.

Such fragmentation strategies have continued long after the time of the Mau Mau case and the migrated archives. There are multiple contemporary examples of similar strategies of fragmentation, and freedom of information requests have been especially helpful in exposing these. As openDemocracy's analysis of freedom of information requests shows, full responses to freedom of information requests are declining by the year: in 2023, only 34 per cent of resolvable freedom of information requests were granted in full.⁴⁶ One response to a freedom of information request that had asked questions relating to a database of the Gibson Inquiry (concerned with UK cases of torture and rendition) strongly echoed the strategies adopted for the migrated archives. The request was refused by the Cabinet Office, with a note that the information was 'not held'. In fact, the information was held by the Intelligence and Security Committee, which, unlike the Cabinet Office, is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Despite the assumption one might easily make that the information does not exist if it is 'not held', as with the migrated archives, this co-ordinated fragmentation conceals both the relevant documents and the coordinated process behind it.

In an attempt to understand the government position on arms sales to Saudi Arabia after the Great Hall massacre of 2016, in which the Saudi-led and UK-, US- and European-backed coalition killed 155 and injured over 525 people at a funeral in Sanaa in Yemen, journalist Dania Akkad submitted a number of freedom of information requests.⁴⁷ Along with these, she submitted subject access requests concerned with the failed requests she had made around this subject. The response to these subject access requests indicates communication and shared knowledge between the Department for International Trade, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the Government Legal Department, which raises questions on how requests are formulated and responded to on a matter that undoubtedly concerns all departments and the information they were (/not) willing to share.⁴⁸

The power of making secrecy through fragmentation is understood clearly by government, and this is why guidance on disclosure of freedom of information requests by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) explicitly refers to the *potential* power of information alongside other documentation, and the need to

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

consider context: ‘You should carefully consider any harm a disclosure may cause where the revealed information has the potential to be combined with other related information already in the public domain.’⁴⁹ The importance of attention being paid to the role and sensitivities of separation and time (which I expand on below) is also well acknowledged by the ICO: ‘You should also consider whether the disclosure would still be harmful because it would draw more attention to a sensitive issue or reopen a debate at a particularly sensitive time’.⁵⁰ The fragmentation of state practices can and does of course take place on a much more visibly violent scale, as in cases like the CIA’s global rendition project, or the destruction of documentation related to Britain’s colonial violence.⁵¹ Whether they take the form of a co-ordinated fragmentation of a global rendition project, an inquiry database, or the literally fragmented information provided in freedom of information requests, these forms of fragmentation of information, and the politics and processes around their making and access, demand closer attention, and evidence the unbounded process of secrecy-making.

Obstruction is also a critical part of the making of state secrecy; and it is closely tied in with the destruction and fragmentation of evidence and documentation. In a similar way - and linked to - the methods outlined above, obstruction occurs both within documents and in access to them. Redactions are what comes to mind when considering obstructions to information within documents. Obstructions are of course not restricted to refusal of access to information within documents. An example of physical obstruction is the recent refusal to Declassified UK of a parliamentary media pass, and hence access to Parliament: internal emails exposed concerns about the media platform’s standpoints and dismissed their focus on UK foreign policy as improper politics.⁵²

As with other methods, obstruction can take on more extreme and visible forms. Multiple examples come to mind of the extreme lengths gone to in obstructing evidence of colonial violence, especially in relation to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The Rafah paramedic massacre in 2025 is one of many cases in point. After occupation forces murdered fifteen paramedics by shooting them multiple times in the head, chest, and back, Unit 504 and the Gen Yehuda Vach (part of the Golani Brigade), who are known for their role in making ‘kill zones’ in Gaza, buried the aid workers they had murdered in a mass grave, and then obstructed entry to agencies trying to access the site and recover the bodies of those murdered. Later, occupation

Soundings

forces murdered 12-year-old Mohammed Saeed al-Bardawil, who had witnessed the mass execution.⁵³

The case of the SAS war crimes committed in Afghanistan is another grave example. Almost all applications for resettlement in the UK submitted by members of the Afghan Special Forces, known as the Triples, have been blocked. The Triples accompanied UK Special Forces in their operations, and this obstruction is therefore not only a physical one, refusing relative safety to UK allies; it is also an obstruction of potential witnesses who could give accounts to a state-approved, official inquiry (i.e., the Independent Inquiry Relating to Afghanistan) of how UK Special Forces operated in Afghanistan. To create this physical obstruction, the manufacture of previously non-existing processes was required. In a supposedly unprecedented move, UK Special Forces were given a secret veto on these resettlement applications; and this veto process, which had no official basis, was overseen by former Director of Special Forces, Gwyn Jenkins, who himself has come under significant scrutiny in relation to the cover up of these war crimes.⁵⁴ Obstruction, then, as a method of secrecy-making, takes a number of forms and is accompanied with other processes highlighted above, and expanded on below.

Fabricating a forgetfulness: the role of time in separation

Destruction, separation and obstruction - these three, closely interlinked, methods of making state secrecy - combine to create a generally experienced, scattered, overwhelming, and obfuscatory (un-/)knowing. These methods are also integral to the re- and un-making of state 'knowledge', 'truths' and 'history'. Outright and blatant lies, 'modifications' and 'errors', as well as the weaponisation of time, are further elements of an ongoing and open-ended experimentation which allows for the continuing modification and adaptation of violent practices.⁵⁵ This experimentation constantly tests and remakes what can and can't be got away with, re-written, and hidden (to some of course), whilst simultaneously causing confusion and distraction, and exhausting the capacity, time, and resources of those attempting to understand, expose, and/or challenge state truths.

This can be seen in relation to the cover-up practices of the SAS in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2013: the same practices had been deployed nearly a decade before, in Iraq: 'the SAS had already developed a method of covering up unlawful

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

killings in Iraq. They planted weapons, known as drop weapons, on the bodies of those they'd killed, to make it look as if they were armed, and then took photos to justify the killings.⁵⁶ And similar scenes have been a recurring feature throughout the latest genocidal onslaught in Gaza. Violent practices and methods of cover up and ‘investigation’ have long been expanded, borrowed, adapted, and experimented with.

Time plays a crucial role in these strategies, both for state practices and those challenging these practices. There are numerous examples of time being weaponised as a means of withholding information, rewriting realities, and/or exhausting and overwhelming those for whom the information concerned holds value in opposing the state/empire's interests. Responses to freedom of information requests offer the example of ‘stonewalling’ practices, whereby authorities delay or prevent access to information within the required timeframe. According to an analysis of FOI requests made in 2023, only half of the year's internal review requests *that were answered* (emphasis added) were completed within the required time, and over a quarter of the complaints made to the Information Commissioner's Office were with regard to Section 10 of the Freedom of Information Act, related to delays in response.⁵⁷ It is worth noting that these practices are deployed for already state censored information - information that hides behind numerous obstacles. What's more, departments use extension loopholes to delay responses within the required timeline but register the responses as ‘in time’: both the Department for International Trade and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office used extensions more than once in every five responses they issued. This helps create an illusion of transparency - on which I expand more below - in spite of these delays.

Time as an excuse and tool of separation is also evident in the ‘forgetful’ attitudes that are integral to the rewriting of state practices and making of secrecy. I want to draw attention here to the ways in which these attitudes are constructed, and their connections to the attitudes and identities of those who make, and are faced with, state secrecy. Ironically, these ‘forgotten’, seemingly negligible, downplayed methods and histories are often connected to theatrical moments - moments of ‘scandal’ or shocking revelation. Once more, a specific set of etiquettes and identities is drawn on to coat this time-based form of separation. A spectacle of care, forgetfulness, and concern is manufactured, as a way of creating separation in time, and distance from violent processes.

Soundings

These methods are not only deployed in written responses - documented in transcripts and government reports; they are also a feature of the speeches and theatrical performances executed by government - and this hints at the limitations of engaging with documents on their own. When asked about whether he had received legal advice that indicated that Israel was breaching international humanitarian law (IHL), ex-prime minister and former foreign secretary David Cameron told the Foreign Affairs Select Committee ‘... I cannot recall every single bit of paper that’s been put in front of me’.⁵⁸ Later, in response to the question, ‘have you received legal advice which says that Israel is in breach of international humanitarian law?’, his response was ‘the short answer to that is no’. Immediately afterwards he convoluted his answer and distanced himself from responsibility in a feigned concern for the lawyers: ‘... but I might want to qualify it instantly because it is not fair on the lawyers. Of course, the lawyers give me lots of advice ...’.⁵⁹ Distance is created not only from the truth but from the very lawyers that are intrinsically part of the Foreign Office’s decisions - in a way that echoes the separation methods described earlier in this article.

A few weeks later, the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the time, Alicia Kearns, who had received much social media praise for her ‘tough questioning’ of Cameron, acknowledged that the Foreign Office *had* indeed received legal advice; it was just not admitting it:

... the Foreign Office has received official legal advice that Israel has broken international humanitarian law but the government has not announced it. They have not said it, they haven’t stopped arms exports ...

The position that David has taken which happens to be the same position as me and I’ve still been very tough on him is that Israel has an *absolute* right to self-defence and I have sat in bunkers and worked with Israeli soldiers and been very proud to do so that I would do it again tomorrow ... [emphasis added].⁶⁰

A theatre of toughness - demanding answers and accountability - is constructed alongside a recurring construction of separation - between individual players (Alicia Kearns and David Cameron in this case), what they represent, and their interests. Even whilst admitting that legal advice had been given to the Foreign Office, Kearns described what had happened as an *un*-announcement from the government -

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

something they’ve *not* said, rather than something they’ve explicitly lied about. Away from the spectacle of ‘tough questioning’ - a performance during which the chair of the Foreign Affairs committee and David Cameron had appeared to be in confrontation, sitting opposite each other and with a supposed opposing and separate stance - there is another reality, of closeness in position and relationship with ‘David’. The performative underplaying of the significance of shared party affiliation, and social intimacy, between Cameron and Kearns - and their part in the government’s role in genocide - is revealing of the reasons for, and frequent superficiality of, separation in making state secrecy.

Cameron’s inability on this occasion to recall his role in war crimes was not a unique event. He relied on a separation in time when questioned about the lethal SAS night raids from 2010 to 2013, during which at least 84 Afghan men and children were killed by British forces. Former President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, had raised the issue of these murders on several occasions when visiting Cameron as the-then UK prime minister, but the killings had been dismissed as ‘accidental’ - and Cameron later claimed he had no recollection of such discussions.⁶¹ The ‘best of Lord Cameron’s recollection’ seemed to be conveniently patchy to say the least, given the consistency of Karzai’s complaints regarding night raids, detentions and civilian casualties, which were well-known to all Western diplomats and military leaders, and had become ‘a significant political problem’.⁶² As with the ‘accident of the deletion of data’ in the case of SAS war crimes in Afghanistan, and the conclusion from an RUC investigation that the fire at Seapark was an ‘accident’ caused by a cigarette (despite Stevens’s conviction that the FRU were the cause), ‘accidents’ - with their anomalous, innocent, and one-off denotations - appear to be a common feature, excuse, practice, and privilege of UK national security practices, and all those who participate in them.⁶³

Similar patterns of an innocent ‘unknowing’ exist in a number of other episodes related to British colonial violence. One example is the response to the demand for colonial files that the Kenyans requested immediately after they had been stolen by the British. Although the British government knew that a ‘huge collection of documents, comprising more than 1,500 files and covering over 100 linear feet of storage, had indeed been taken from Nairobi and brought to London in 1963’, Kenyan officials were simply told that no such collection of documents existed, and that the British had removed nothing that they were

Soundings

not entitled to take with them in December 1963.⁶⁴ The document that detailed and acknowledged these files - described as “sensitive documents”, which might embarrass Her Majesty’s Government, embarrass members of the police or army, or compromise intelligence sources’ - was only released in 1999, in line with what was then the 30-year-rule.⁶⁵ The response to the Kenyans not only indicates the lies of the British government, according to their very own records: it also indicates the sense of entitlement of the British colonial authorities, something that they constantly maintained and relied on. Countless communications concerning the destruction and migration of colonial files from British colonies reflect these attitudes of entitlement and indicate what they considered to be - or at least communicated as being - ‘normal’. Still presented as necessary and normal, colonial projects and the relationships they rely on and reproduce continue to be deployed in government positions today. One example is UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy’s response when questioned on the role of British training of Zionist forces committing a genocide: ‘The UK *of course* [emphasis added] provides military courses for our allies, but we always emphasise, in all those courses, the critical importance of international humanitarian law. It is important that we work with our allies to meet the amazing standards of our own armed services, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman would not want us to depart from that.’⁶⁶

This assurance with regard to an entitlement to engage in these violent practices echoes the episodes of (a continuing) colonial-era violence - and, perhaps surprisingly, the government doesn’t completely shy away from them. As Ben Gowland’s article on the Information Research Department in this issue discusses, the current UK government’s embrace of Ernest Bevin, Labour’s Secretary of state for foreign affairs from 1945 to 1951, is apparently not affected by considerations of Bevin’s role in British colonialism, anti-communism, and propaganda-making across the world. During his period as Foreign Secretary, Lammy boasted of his admiration of Bevin as his predecessor, acknowledging him as a ‘personal hero’, and stating that he would be committed to ‘do all I can to build on the great legacy Bevin left us’.⁶⁷

Alternatives

This article has highlighted struggles around competing representations of secrecy. But it is also worth attending, even if briefly, to the notions of transparency and openness that are generally deployed as opposing and countering concepts to

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

secrecy - as indicators of democratic governance, public participation, accountability, truth, and openness - in strong contrast, and as an alternative to, the entrenched secrecy of ‘foreign’ and authoritarian rule.

Stretching William Walters’s questions around the mobilisation of secrecy, we can learn a significant amount in how transparency is mobilised and the relations it reproduces.⁶⁸ Critical transparency and security studies also offer insight into this issue. For example, instead of viewing transparency as a static concept in direct opposition to secrecy, Lorna Anne Viola urges us to view transparency in relation to *power*. (‘Transparency does not “merely” disclose information but shapes and creates relations of power’; ‘... power, in turn, conditions the kinds of effects transparency can have on sociopolitical relations’.⁶⁹) In discussing the Snowden revelations and the responses to them in the US, UK and Germany, Viola warns of a ‘transparency trap’, and shows how the promotion of transparency can work to expand state surveillance: transparency cannot be understood simply as a positive norm inherently invoking truth and trust, or through the simple concept of revelation/exposure - rather, it is a fragile and contingent concept, and one that cannot be understood independently of its deployers and their aims. This analysis reinforces the more nuanced understandings of secrecy this article has discussed and suggests the need for caution with regard to the alternatives we try to build. The need for caution around the relationship between openness and state secrecy, particularly when they are set up in opposition to one another, has been interrogated elsewhere. One example within the context of UK national security practices can be found in debates about GCHQ. In an article dissecting parliamentary debates around GCHQ from the time of its official acknowledgment in the early 1980s until 2017, the authors problematise the proclaimed ‘openness’ of GCHQ, which had supposedly been enhanced under Thatcher, and had been expanded with further legislation through ‘accountability mechanisms’.⁷⁰ The main interventions around GCHQ in parliamentary debates, however, seemed, conversely, to provide legitimisation of British practices, and had been accompanied by a shrinking of the space for interrogating the violent nature and effects of these practices in the parliamentary arena, rather than the introduction of measures for greater accountability and resistance. This prompts us to question what and who was/is not being asked about.

The illusion of transparency can be seen in some of the performative episodes I have discussed above, which paint care and concern as pivotal to British decisions,

Soundings

while simultaneously referencing the sensible/virtuous/necessary/British reliance on secrecy. This illusion exists not only in the words deployed and laws introduced, but also in what is revealed in ‘official’ documentation and the physical places of power they exist within and are attached to. Hazel Carby’s reflections in the National Archives describes this perfectly:

This room is designed to promise transparency in all transactions: a promise that nothing will be withheld or concealed, that everything can be known. In this vacuum of light, no shadows would dare fall to obscure, disguise or blunt the edges of documented truths bound in files and books and papers tied together with ribbon. Uniform exposure to the light offers assurance that what is past can be recovered, made easily accessible and available to all who have the time to sit and stare.⁷¹

Carby’s work chimes in with the limitations and problems of state archives touched on earlier in this article. There is an expanding critical literature around the violence of the archives; and, as well as highlighting this violence, Carby’s work argues the need to build and rely on alternative ways of knowing through making a commitment to avoid reproducing an exclusive attachment of value to state documentation.

This piece has focused on state documentation, knowledge, and violence. It has attempted to speak to the murky mobilisation of secrecy and its antidotes as imposed and deployed by the state. It is crucial to trace, expose and undermine the state’s practices of secrecy, but at the same time not to reproduce or depend on its knowledge systems, or make them central to the exposing of British violence or other accountability efforts. Beyond hidden and destroyed documents and digital files, archives also exist in printscapes, cassette tapes, media, wedding folk songs, poetry, stories and hearts.⁷² A serious understanding of alternatives demands we expose *state* alternatives to secrecy processes, dismissing their centrality, and commit instead to liberatory frameworks and forms of knowledge, practices, mobilisations, and methods.

Unredacted: a contribution to alternatives

Whilst this intervention has brought together different analyses and examples that have attended to the contradictions of secrecy and its (un-)making processes,

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

I wish to also use this space dialectically. I do so with the intent of skill-sharing through the difficult medium of an article, as well as with the aim of extending an invitation to others to take part in the exposing of the ‘colonial fragility’ of UK state secrecy that I have briefly described in this piece - and, in so doing, make a further contribution to the undermining of the lethal apparatuses these practices rely on and reproduce.⁷³ Accordingly, this brief section introduces Unredacted, a small but expanding and significant tool for exposing violent state practices, through state and corporate documentation.

Unredacted is a recently set-up investigative research unit that focuses on UK national security practices. It brings together and holds a number of projects and collections, as well as an overall archive of UK national security documents in one place. The repository is large and growing; it currently holds over 10,000 documents, which have been collected by journalists, researchers, campaigners, legal teams, students, and NGOs. It is focused on ‘archiving from above’ - i.e. from conventional centres of power and authority. The document types held in the archive vary: they include responses to freedom of information requests, government reports, court documents, parliamentary committee documents and NGO reports. This focus on state and corporate information is no doubt limiting, but it works to expose and elucidate the violence inherent, and continuously reproduced, in the project(s) of British ‘national security’ (whether that be in bordering, counterterrorism, and/or genocide); and it also exposes the means by which these practices are hidden, revealed, explained, obscured, forgotten ...

Searchable and accessible in one place, the growing repository defies some of the barriers and fragmentation outlined above, and the digital element collapses space and time, allowing for different documentation to be searched (by content and metadata) and accessed in one place. Documents are collectively held in the archive, but specific projects include within their holdings briefings and collection sets that allow for more specific framing and analysing, and for connections to be drawn between different documents. The ‘Special Forces War Crimes’ project, for example, which investigates war crimes committed by UK Special Forces, holds multiple collection sets relevant to different parts of the inquiry, as well as briefings that provide an overview of particular documents.⁷⁴ The organisation of these document sets allows for a speedier analysis of inquiry transcripts, witness statements, reports and communication logs.

Soundings

The Freedom of Information project is another part of the archive that defies the weaponisation of time that has become all too common. The collection brings together a host of requests from a number of sources; and among the key sources are already existing responses from government departments. Although good practice, according to the Freedom of Information Act, includes making already requested information accessible, a quick navigation of the government transparency portal reveals all the problems that we have come to expect, including the non-disclosure of FOI requests and the *selected* disclosure of FOI requests - alongside the difficulty of the task of navigating and accessing, and analysing what is made public and accessible. Requesting and analysing *already* responded-to requests, Unredacted team members have asked for the release of relevant responses concerned with queries on UK national security practices, which can then be made public.

Freedom of information requests in this project collection are also collected from elsewhere. Some responses are collected from researchers, campaigners and journalists who have spent years asking questions, waiting, and chasing up requests. Responses to these requests often accompany a news story, an academic project, or a campaign aim, but their 'relevance' can be short-lived, eclipsed by other 'stories' and 'moments'; and they are too quickly shifted to old drives, archived news clippings and expired academic project websites and interests. Making these documents accessible and searchable allows researchers, campaigners, legal practitioners, and all those challenging these practices to trace patterns and learn from previous responses - both in the content of the responses (the information released, hidden, refused, alluded to, etc), and in the methodologies of freedom of information requests. Accessing these requests also allows users to ask questions about *how* requests are responded to. These documents can then become useful/relevant in 'moments', 'events' and 'turns' that demand an urgent response.

The making of these collection sets and the archive is undoubtedly imperfect, and, as with other archives, its power lies in the hands of the people who craft and use the collections, and their purposes. Decisions about what/who is (ir/)relevant in making these collections and growing this archive - for example in the journalists and organisations approached, or in the responses deemed un/interesting, or the focuses chosen - are of course not neutral, and are not exempt from the power relations that exist in archiving practices and beyond. And a focus on the role of state documentation without critical engagement and purpose risks reproducing the

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

elevated importance of the state and its written documentation as representing the official and authentic accounts of history. In so many ways, the documents cannot speak for themselves.

However, when used with caution and an acknowledgement of its limitations, a resource like Unredacted can contribute to methods that critically expose the fragility of UK national security practices as well as the secrecy and means of revelation these practices are entangled in. Sharing this resource, and encouraging readers to engage, contribute, collaborate, and help curate their own collections can enhance the more critical aspects of the platform, and allow us to unravel the violent practices inherent in ‘national security’. One effort to do this has been undertaken while making this special issue - with the attempt at making accessible the documents from the Information Research Department that Ben Gowland’s piece draws on.

With this overview and call for collaboration, an invitation is made to further understand, expose, and learn from the making and unmaking of state secrecy; to attempt to achieve a more complicated and accurate understanding of authoritarianism; and to make further efforts to chip away at the foundations that underpin the violence of British national security practices.

Conclusion

This article has sought to encourage a move away from the static and superficial understandings of state secrecy and authoritarianism that dismiss the paradoxical and changing nature of both. Whilst the focus on spectacular violence has been limited, it has aimed to shed light on the visibly contradictory aspects of state secrecy. The article has been focused on secrecy in relation to issues of ‘foreign’ policy, but with the acknowledgement that it also operates closer to ‘home’, in the ‘domestic’ sphere - sometimes in extremely ‘spectacular’ cases of violence and associated hiding/investigating/revealing practices (as in the case of Grenfell); and sometimes in the ‘unremarkable’, normalised, belittled, state violence that kills, detains, polices and impoverishes daily. In its limited focus on UK state secrecy practices, mainly as revealed through official documentation, this article has echoed analyses of secrecy that draw on its paradoxical elements and raised questions about the continuous making and adapting of secrecy, as well as its potential to be mobilised in a variety of ways.

Soundings

In his testimony at the Gaza Tribunal, Mark Smith admitted to sharing around five per cent of what he knew.⁷⁵ In the recognition that histories, knowledge, and truths are not solely held by the state (which in any case holds contradictory positions, and of ongoing relationships with those who make, collaborate, profit and suffer from its practices), there is much to be hopeful about, even within the exposing and unravelling of these practices. The theatre that portrays tough and rigorous questioning, legal processes, and democratic transparency, can be made visible, and the state's seemingly invincible secrecy practices are much more fragile than they seem. Perhaps a metaphor for this fragility can be seen in the fence surrounding the British base in Cyprus, RAF Akrotiri - a crucial node in the making of the ongoing genocide in Gaza: part of the fence has been broken for a long time, and locals nonchalantly swim past the borders into 'British space'.⁷⁶

Fragmentation also allows for a multi-pronged approach towards exposing/unravelling/resisting practices; while 'errors' in state secrecy practices open up other opportunities - they have often revealed more accurate and expansive realities, and made possible a better-prepared resistance. One recent example was the US pilot who forgot to turn off their transponder whilst operating a surveillance flight over Gaza, allowing the flight path from RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus over Gaza to be publicly accessed for the first time.⁷⁷

Time also brings with it potential. Uncovered histories and alternative archives 'from below' bring new understandings; knowledge can be fought for, and sometimes emerges unannounced - demanding a reckoning that is sometimes not prepared for. This can be seen in the case of the legal fight brought by the Mau Mau campaigners; and in the fears expressed by the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland, George Hamilton, who described the challenges that would arise with the opening up of the Seapark archive - which he termed 'the Vault'.⁷⁸

As always, Palestine has been the compass. In writing this piece, it has been hard not to see Palestinians in every case described - in the discussion of destruction and obstruction; the kill lists drawn up by UK Special Forces of Afghan men and children; the framing of innocents; the gaslighting of the Mau Mau campaigners; the funeral bombing in Sanaa; the manufacture of lies; attitudes of forgetfulness; and the violence of waiting. But Palestine and Palestinians have also been present in these reflections, in the knowledge that there are huge limitations within the secrecy I have described, that serves an imperial project

‘Everyone knew what was happening’

built and maintained on the exploitation and mass murder of communities across the world. Many of the processes outlined above have served, and continue to serve, alternative means and worlds. Secrecy has been - and continues to be - mobilised for disruption, resistance and solidarity - for example, in smuggled-out and travelling prison art, or poetry distributed through cassettes in underground networks; and in organising to expose and destroy the infrastructures of British state/empire violence.⁷⁹ Palestine is also, then, the compass that shows us how secrecy can be mobilised to serve liberation, internationalism, anti-colonialism, solidarity - and an endless revolutionary love.

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Soundings

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22. Cobain, *The History Thieves*, p128.

23. *Ibid*, p128.

24. *Ibid*, p212.

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‘Everyone knew what was happening’

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Soundings

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'Everyone knew what was happening'

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75. Mark Smith, 'Part 3: What has Britain's role been in Gaza?', *The Gaza Tribunal*, London 2025: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezu5OozxzYM>.
76. Phil Miller, 'Will this documentary put Keir Starmer behind bars?', *Declassified UK*, 11 Dec 2025: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fk3t28TiAc>.
77. Matt Kennard and Abdullah Farooq, 'Revealed: Gaza Spy Flights From UK Base On Cyprus Secretly Shift to Plane Leased by Company with Billions in US Military Contracts', *Palestine Deep Dive*, 4 August 2025: <https://www.palestinedeepdive.com/p/revealed-gaza-spy-flights-from-uk>. Not only did this error shed light on the route taken whilst spying over Gaza; it also confirmed the ways in which information on these surveillance flights was being censored. The flight path shown confirmed that surveillance flights continued despite the absence of flight tracking of the usual RAF's Shadow R1 aircraft (that would indicate RAF flights taking off from Cyprus briefly with the transponder turned off before reaching Gaza). The US pilot's error confirmed that surveillance flights continued but were now simply unseen (or at least supposed to be), given the private plane's place on a blocked list that meant that even the plane's taking off and landing could not be tracked on commercial flight tracking sites. See also: Phil Miller, 'Will this documentary put Keir Starmer behind bars?'.
78. Cobain, *The History Thieves*, pp208-209.

Soundings

79. See, for example, prisoner Alaziz Atef's artwork produced and smuggled out of Ofer Prison. A talk on Atef's exhibition 'Room 14' is available via: <https://www.workshops4gaza.com/calendar/kanafani-and-the-spectre-of-palestinian-statehood>. See also Muthaffar al-Nawab's poetry largely circulated via cassettes in the 1970s, and prominent in Atef's work and the Palestinian prisoner movement.