



In Search of Jerusalem Airport

Nahed Awwad

Egyptian and foreign actors and actresses
in the Jerusalem Airport. *Photo Source:*
Collection of Rene Farhan Marouf, 1961.

As most Palestinians, I know this place by the name “Qalandia Airport”, named after the neighbouring village and refugee camp. I’m from a generation that was born after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967 and what I know about the place was that small domestic Israeli planes landed there in the 90’s which I once watched on my way to work. Later I witnessed the growth of the Qalandia checkpoint to the east end of the runway, which is now considered one of the biggest checkpoint in the West Bank that blocks the Jerusalem-Ramallah road, turning it into a dead end street. The airport lies along the road that links Jerusalem to Ramallah. It has been occupied by the Israeli army since 1967, at a 5km distance from Ramallah and 10km distance from Jerusalem.

Although the Jerusalem Airport is five minutes away from Ramallah, the only way out for us Palestinians today in the West Bank to the world is the Queen Alia Airport in Amman. Palestinians with West Bank identity cards are forbidden to use Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv and Gaza's airport that was destroyed by the Israeli government in 2002. The Palestinian Authority has had no permission from the Israelis to rebuild the airport until today; even so I would need permission from the Israeli Authorities to enter Gaza in order to travel from there. It is hard to believe that the gate to the world was only five minutes from home.

It was an eye opening experience for me listening to Abu Jamil retelling me his personal memories of the airport, a Ramallah book keeper who used to travel more than once a week to Cairo and Beirut to acquire books for his shop, that was the first time I heard accounts of the 'Jerusalem Airport'. Later I heard another story from a traveller that returned from the U.S. after completing her studies in 1963.

It was however a different experience to lay my eyes on photos of the Airport for the very first time. That was in the summer of 2005. I sat on the balcony of Rene Farhan Marouf's house in Al Bireh. Rene is the wife of Farhan Marouf, a former employee of Arab Airways who had worked at the Jerusalem Airport for ten years.



Group of travellers arriving to the Jerusalem Airport. *Photo Source: Collection of Dr. Mohammed al Qutub, 1963.*



A group of tourists and pilgrims in front of the Departure Hall at the Jerusalem Airport. *Photo Source: Collection of Youssef Hajjar, 1961.*

Marouf shared her husband's photo collection of the Jerusalem Airport with me. It was a fascinating experience, for it was as if I was watching one of those classical Egyptian movies starring women in wide fluffy dresses, wearing huge hats and oversized glasses. I was drawn to the outgoing atmosphere expressing freedom not only in movement but also in the social values. This is how I fell in love with the Airport of Jerusalem and my passion for knowing the history of the place.

I kept thinking about the photos, they inspired me to find out more about the time and the place. Armed with a few photos and the names of some former co-workers from my initial contacts I started my journey of researching the history of the Jerusalem Airport. It was not easy. Although the airport once was a major traffic hub of our region and a Palestinian center, information about it was scarce, especially photographic information as in many Palestinian archives have been destroyed or stolen. It was therefore clear to me that my search needed to focus on individuals and that I had to start from scratch. On my way, I met many wonderful people, air hostesses, traffic officers, pilots and others that were willing to share their stories, photos, and documents with me. I was happy to see the glow in their eyes when they mentioned the glorious days of the airport.



Dignitaries in front of the main building of the Jerusalem Airport, in the middle Ruhi al Khatib, mayor of Jerusalem, and to his left, Anwar Nusseibeh Jordanian Defense Minister. *Photo source: Collection of the Tamari Family, 1961.*



Family of Farhan Marouf in front of the Jerusalem Airport building. *Photo Source: Collection of Rene Farhan Marouf, 1959.*

The airport was established by the British Mandate in 1920's. It was a small military base known by the British as 'Kolundia Airfield'. In 1948, the British Mandate ended and the West Bank was put under the supervision of Jordan. In the early 1950's the Jordanians turned the airfield into a civil airport, erected the still existing airport building and named it the Jerusalem Airport.

The Airport traffic control building did not change much since the 50's, the shape of it looked like an airplane or a ship. There was a left wing that was one long flat floor, the round part in the middle with the tower on top, and the right wing. Going through the main entrance into the round shaped hall, you'd find a souvenir shop and a money exchanger managed by Theresa Fanous. In the middle there was a spiral staircase leading up to the terrace and the coffee shop that was run by the Al Alami family and above was the control tower. In the left wing of the building there were counters for the main airlines: Air Liban and Middle East Airline (in 1964 Air Liban was merged with MEA), Misr Air (Egypt Air), Trans Arabia Airline (the Kuwaiti Airline, in the 1950's there was a big wave of Palestinians traveling to work in the Gulf), Air Jordan of the Holy Land (now Royal Jordanian). There was also the royal room mainly used by King Hussein on his frequent visits to the airport and for welcoming important guests. In the right wing there were the customs offices, the transit lounge and departure area including passport control, the tourist police, the health and fire department, and a post office.

Today on the southern side of the runway (the Jerusalem side), there is a depot for mini-buses displaying their route 'Jerusalem Airport – Kufr Aqab'. The drivers are from Al Ram (the neighbouring city) or from Jerusalem. They are 25-45 years old and have witnessed the place throughout the Israeli occupation. The Airport's name always crowns their buses, but they don't know much about it.

One driver: *"The airport? It's like a land mark. It's true we can't access it, but we are nearby, and it's like a meeting point at the entrance of the city or like a well-known store."*

A few hundred meters from the van station, we arrive at a neighbourhood called the 'airport neighbourhood': an enclave that is home to about 500 people, isolated from Jerusalem and Ramallah by Israeli checkpoints, walls, fences, and colonies. There I met Norma Haweet who has always lived there. The house was built by her father in 1947 and is still intact. The furniture in the salon reminded me of the atmosphere of that era: the seats had wooden handles partially covered with velvet, and an old record player that had the music of Arab and Western singers. Somehow, she is a key to the time, and remains a witness to the site's history.

Looking around from the roof of her house one sees the airport's control tower on the left, a camouflage net covers part of the building. Opposite to us is the runway, and to the right the old road connecting Jerusalem and Ramallah that used to cross



Hawitt family in reception for one of their sons studying at the American University of Beirut. *Photo Source: Collection Norma Hawitt.*



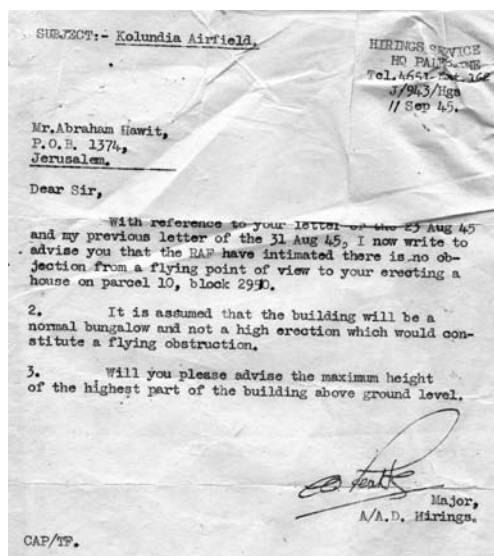
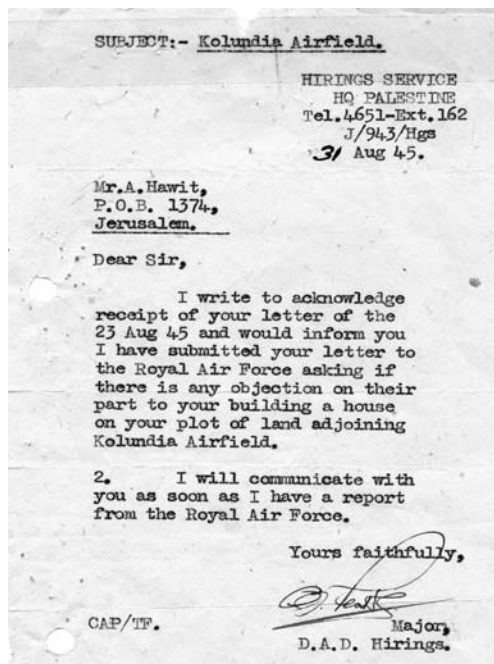
Tania, Vera, Vladimir, with their mother Margo Dabbas traveling to Beirut in front of an Arab Airways airplane. *Photo Source: Collection Tamari Family, 1950*

the runway. A few meters in front of the barrier blocking the entrance to the site stands the small 'airport mosque'. It was built by Kuwaitis who lived in the neighbourhood until 1967. They used to spend their summer vacations here and visited their children who studied in Jerusalem at the Mutran and Schmidt Schools for they sought a better education for their children other than what was available in other Arab cities. At the time, these schools were considered some of the best schools in the Middle East with students from other Arab countries.

Norma recalls:

"My brother studied in Beirut in the 1950s. He used to come home to visit and called to inform us about his arrival time. When we would hear the plane's engines, we would run up to the roof to watch the plane land, and then we'd run toward the airport to pick him up. Before he would leave the plane, we would be on the balcony waiving to him..."

From the Airport neighbourhood I was led to Amman to meet Hania Yasmina, a former air and ground hostess who worked in the Jerusalem Airport for three years. She once lived in a house only a few meters to the north of the runway before she got married and moved to Aden, Yemen with her husband Nabil. They were outside of Palestine when the war of 1967 broke out and they haven't been able to return since. They live in Amman until today. On route to Hania's house we can't see the Airport from its



Documents: Correspondence between Ibrahim Hawitt and the British Mandate Administration of the Qalandia Airport concerning a requested permit for building a house on lands next to the airfield.
Source: Collection Norma Hawitt, 1945.



Fareed al Atrash arriving to Jerusalem Airport, 1961.



The American actress Katherine Hepburn in the Jerusalem Airport. *Photo Source: Collection of Youssef Hajjar, beginning 1960s.*

northern side, the Ramallah side. In order to catch a glance, you need to walk about 200m on a side alley, barely wide enough for a car. Turning to the left, after passing a number of houses – one reaches Hania’s house – the Israeli wall obscures the sight of the runway. But the control tower is visible. When I face the airport, I can see the main building behind the yellow barrier. Here only the shadows of clouds and birds are able to land amidst the bushes, abandoned vehicles, stray dogs and military jeeps that pass from time to time. In her looks and way, Hania Yasmina still has the style of an air hostess. She recalls these times with a laugh.

Hania: *“I went from our home to the airport walking, I simply crossed the runway. Two minutes and I was at work. We had lots of fun; we worked from 6am to 6pm and never felt tired. We were like a small family. Later I worked in other places, too, but it was never like the Jerusalem Airport.”*

The essence of it all: For Palestinians, the Jerusalem Airport was their gate to the world and it was the entrance to the Holy Land for tourists, pilgrims, and the whole of the Arab world. Lots of famous people actors, religious figures, and politicians all landed in the Jerusalem Airport.

Hania: *“Omar al Sharif came to the airport. He spent his vacation in Jerusalem and stayed at the American Colony Hotel during the shooting of ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ in Jordan. He would approach us to chat and I recall him commenting on our hairdo in his lovely Egyptian accent. He thought that women shouldn’t pin their hair up but leave it loose, because a woman’s beauty was her hair. Farid al Atrash also came once after he sang for the King in Jordan. He was quite a gentleman.”*

In my search for pilots I was told that I would be able find Captain Amin al Hussein in Amman sitting in the Jordan Hotel Café/Bar every day around noon. And indeed, there I found him sitting with a friend drinking a beer. In 1956, Captain al Hussein trained to become a pilot in Texas, U.S.A. He dreamed of becoming a military pilot, but his respective application was rejected most likely because he was a Palestinian so he told me. So, he trained to be a civil pilot. He worked with Air Jordan serving on the route from Amman to Jerusalem and from there to Beirut, Cairo, Kuwait, and Jeddah. In 1965 he became the chief pilot of Air Jordan and later he was King Hussein’s private pilot for twenty years. Between 1957 and 1967, Captain al Hussein flew every day from Amman to Jerusalem.

Captain al Hussein: *“The runway was 6000 feet long. We navigated on sight. The Airport was open during the day only. When we wanted to land, someone from the airport tower – I only recall his family name, Totah – started a honk...hoooooo, to stop the traffic for us to land. It took us 11 minutes from take off in Amman to touch down. Wow, it was very nice; I*



Pilots and air hostesses of Air Jordan in front of Jerusalem Airport, among them Captain Amin al Hussein.

Photo Source: Collection Martha Melhes.

- From Left to Right
1. Flight Hostess JOVANA.
 2. DRIVER SALIM ABU SA'D.
 3. Flight Maria Jaber,
 4. Captain Jesse Stallworth,
 5. Captain Hank Gilman,
 6. Flight Engineer Hasan Awad.
 7. Captain Clark Jordan ^{نور الدين}
 8. Flight Hostess Nadia ^{Latifa Studio} Shammis,
 9. First officer Amin Hussein
 10. Flight Hostess Annunna Kassilian
 11. First officer Mike Bouteid
 12. Flight ~~Officer~~ Hostess Peggy. ~~Arabian~~ Aghabian
 13. Captain Johnson, Ralf.

remember in front of the airport building there were nice flowers and some stairs. When I landed the workers brought me fresh Ka'k (sesame bread) from Damascus Gate. We would sit on the stairs and eat together meanwhile the passengers were boarding. Then we took off for Beirut."

Husseini adds: "In 1961 I was the private pilot for Peter O'Toole and Omar Al Sharif for one month when they were filming Lawrence of Arabia. They rented the airplane from Air Jordan, it was a Dakota DC3. I remember that Peter O'Toole was drunk most of the time."

Captain al Husseini was the first pilot to land with a jet plane – the “Caravel” – in the Jerusalem Airport in 1964.

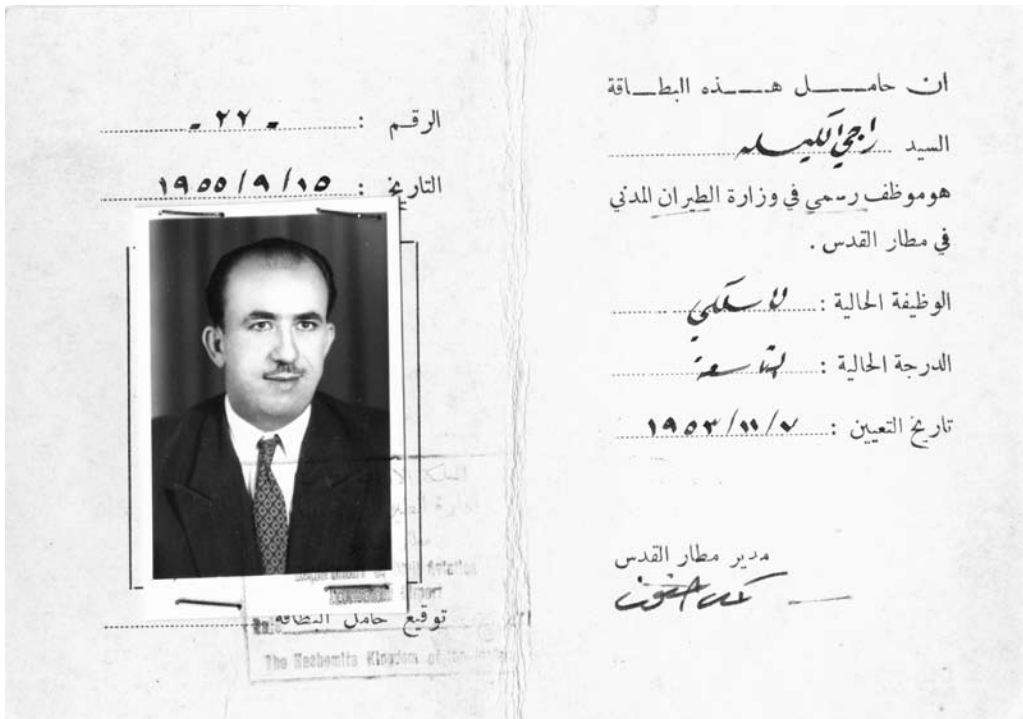
Legally, according to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Assembly Resolutions, the airport is still registered as the Jerusalem Airport located in the occupied Arab territories and registered under the jurisdiction of Jordan in the ICAO Middle East Air Navigation Plan. Consequently, Israel was not allowed to use the Jerusalem Airport as an international airport. After repairing its war-related damages, the Jerusalem Airport was re-opened in 1969 and was only used for domestic flights. Israel once tried to break the ICAO resolution by directing an airplane in bound from Europe to the Jerusalem Airport. But the attempt didn't succeed due to the resolutions that were produced by the Arab governments which stated that any airlines landing at the Jerusalem Airport would not be allowed to enter their countries.

The future of the Airport remains unknown. Since the 1990's some articles were published in various newspapers that proposed future scenarios for the airport. In 1992, for example, an article was published in the Al Quds newspaper stating that an Israeli businessman was willing to turn the airport into a pilot school. That same year another article elaborated on German support for turning the airport into an Israeli/Palestinian airport in which the runway would be divided into two lanes, one for Israeli, the other for Palestinian planes. Much later, in May 2007, another article appeared in the same newspaper showing a map indicating the location of a new Israeli colony that was being planned to be built on the airport's land.

As Jerusalem is one of the delayed issues in the negotiations between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority, the future of the Jerusalem Airport remains pending. Besides the army jeeps and the dogs that patrol the runway from time to time, there will be no traffic in the Jerusalem Airport until further notice. Today, the site is not only occupied, it barely even exists in the memories of my generation, and it remains hidden in the minds of the people who knew it as an aviation hub. During my research I was only able to find a few lines and paragraphs about the airport mainly under the name of Qalandia, Kalandia, or Atarot, as the Israelis call it. The only photos I was able to find from public sources were those taken after 1967.



Crew of the Arab Airways. Photo Source: Collection of Rene Farhan Marouf, 1960.



Employee identification card issued by Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Civil Aviation Ministry, Jerusalem Airport, for employee Raji al Kaileh. Source: Collection Raji Kaileh, 1955.

My main sources were the people who worked in the Airport or travelled from it, those who kept photos and their memories. In my search for film footage I went to Jordan TV archives. I was able to view the edited footage from the times showing King Hussein in the West Bank but not the Airport. I have been told that the original negatives were burned due to storage problems!

I learned a lot through this exciting journey. I discovered a part of my history as a Palestinian that I knew nothing about. I got a small taste of freedom and I was able to see the doorway that was once opened to the world. It is important not to remain stuck in a reality that has been forced upon us, but rather it is important to provoke it which was the aim of my research. I would like to thank all those who shared their stories and photo collections with me: Rene Farhan Marouf, Norma Hawitt, Hania Yasmina, Captain Amin al Husseini, Martha Melhes Mohammed Sami Bitar, Yousef Hajjar, the Keili family and the Tamari family. Initially, this research was undertaken to make a documentary film about the Jerusalem Airport. It was finalized in April 2008 with the title “5 Minutes from Home”, written and directed by Nahed Awwad. Later, in the same year, photos and documents were on display in an exhibition of the same title: “5 Minutes from Home.”

Nahed Awwad has been working in television and films since 1997. She finished a diploma in TV communication and video editing at Conway School in Canada. In 2003/2004 she studied documentary production at the European Film College in Denmark. In 2002 she made her first film titled “Lions”, followed by “Going For a Ride?”, “25KM”, “The Fourth Room” (2005) “Not just any sea” (2006). In April, 2008 she finished a long documentary titled “5 Minutes From Home”.



A travel ticket for Yousef Hajjar traveling from Jerusalem, Beirut and heading towards Dahran in Saudi Arabia dated 15/1/1967, 5 months before the war of 1967.



Return ticket to Jerusalem for Yousef Hajjar from Dahran dated 1971. Yousef Hajjar was incapable of flying directly back to Jerusalem Airport because of the 1967 war. His last destination on that route was Amman. He needed to apply for “family reunification” with the Israeli occupation authorities to re-enter Jerusalem.