



The Unmaking of Palestinian Neighborhoods in Jerusalem: 'French Hill' in Focus

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Al-Urwah Al-Withqa, French Hill, Lifta, Issawiyya, Karm Louise, Ard Al-Samar, Mount Scopus—these names resonate with the complex historical entanglements of an area in late twentieth-century north-east Jerusalem. Hebrew University, Hadassa Hospital, the Hyatt Hotel are sentry-like markers in the concrete axis of a municipal road system through which most people come to know the area today. Beneath the modern urban Israeli infrastructure lies a rich discursive terrain in which Palestinians tell how this fragmentary space signifies—both in the past and the present—a different and diverse set of relations;

relations far more complex than the "modernization of urban space" narrative suggests.

Street signs pointing towards an elevated area to the right of the Ramallah road as Mount Scopus are the only instance in which the municipal infrastructure in northeast Jerusalem makes these historical entanglements visible. Named from the Greek word "scopus," meaning "to watch over" or "to look at," the elevated area overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem has been an important strategic site through much of the city's history, from the Romans to Salah ad-Din, from the Ottoman period to that of the Mandate. In contradistinction to the "worlding" of Mount Scopus in modern Israeli meaning-making,¹ for Palestinians names like *Karm Louise* ("Louise's Vineyards"), *Ard al-Samar* ("Black Land") and *Al-Urwa al-Withqa* ("Tight Bond") provide a vocabulary that points towards a very recent past in which these now fragmented and transformed Palestinian areas were connected to the everyday life of the city below. The relations between people, gardens, and agricultural land on the northern edges of the city remain alive in the politics of naming and mapping of areas along the Jerusalem-Ramallah road. Thus *Al-Urwa Al-Withaq* derives its name from its close proximity to the city's Shaykh Jarrah neighborhood, and *Ard Al-Samar* refers to the grayish color of the

¹ [A term from postcolonial theory, "worlding" refers to the process by which colonizers map and name colonized space in order, so to speak, to bring it into the world of the colonizer and inscribe it with Eurocentric meanings. *Ed.*]

soil. The genealogical origin of the names here becomes less important than the relations they suggest between space and people. A collection of houses on the right side of the bridge on the Ramallah road continues to be referred to as *Karm Louise* by Palestinians. According to Muhammad Mahmoud Odeh, a resident in the neighborhood since 1952, the central characteristic of *Karm Louise* was a collection of vineyards and a water reservoir that brought water from Ayn Farrah to Jerusalem. However, the figure of "Louise" remains lost in the shadows of history, surfacing on the edges of stories of a priest, a former soldier in the French military, who bought land and tended vineyards in the area perhaps as early as the seventeenth century.

If the agricultural coding of stretches along an urban highway suggests one modality of anti-colonial mapping, the names of two Palestinian villages, Lifta and Issawiyya, and one of an Israeli settlement, French Hill, evoke the violent making and unmaking of neighborhoods in the city. Built in the aftermath of the 1967 war, French Hill is an upper middle class secular Israeli neighborhood. In the words of Uri Mikhaeli, the chairman of the French Hill Administration, the settlement adopted the "local nickname" of the area. In this version the settlement was named after a Captain French who had set up camp on Mount Scopus during the Mandate. Administratively grouped together with another settlement on the west side of the Jerusalem-Nablus road, Ramat Eshkol, this northern Jerusalem area is home to 30,000 Israelis. The making of

French Hill impacts upon what remains of the lands of the destroyed village of Lifta and constitutes the source for the "unmaking" of the Palestinian village of Issawiyya.

The village of Lifta was destroyed during the 1948 war. The northern Jerusalem settlements of French Hill and Ramot Eshkol are built on land originally belonging to the village. Today about 600 Palestinians, most of whom trace their family's history to Lifta, live in about 50 houses, old and new, scattered throughout "French Hill." The memories and recollections of older residents point towards the kind of transformations of space that were taking place during the Mandate in the villages on the northeastern edges of the city. Amna Abu Layl recounts how villagers began to disregard older rural spatial divisions separating spaces of dwelling from village agricultural land. In 1935 her own extended family began to enlarge the sheds on the land they used for growing fruits and vegetables. By the end of the decade the sheds had become summerhouses, and by 1946 the extended Abu Layl family moved from the village itself into new houses built on the land. Fourteen years of age during the war, today Amna Abu Layl proudly recalls joining her father, uncle, and grandfather, her own rifle in hand, in the quest to protect their land from the Jewish army stationed at Karm Louise. The rest of the women and children, meanwhile, took refuge in the courtyard of al-Haram al-Sharif. After the war, though, she too was made to join the women, now temporarily relocated to the village of Surda near BirZeit. In 1949 the

women rejoined the family in their new houses on what had been Lifta village land. Amna Abu Layl still lives there today.

One block from the Hyatt Hotel, across the street from Amna Abu Layl, an elderly widow of the house of Ulwya Husseinii recalls the struggles of her family of urban professionals. Residing in the Upper Baqa'a, she and her husband bought a piece of Lifta village land during the Mandate. A few years prior to their purchase a water well had been built on this land. By the late 1920s the villagers of Lifta, and especially the Abu Layls, became dependent on this well. Mrs. Husseinii recalls that when the water supplies to the village were cut during the 1948 war, the family was able to provide the villagers with the water they needed. After the war Mrs. Husseinii and her husband, a medical doctor, lived and worked in Syria, Lebanon, the US, Canada, and Egypt. They returned in early 1967 with the intention of building a home on their land on the outskirts of what used to be Lifta. With the outbreak of the 1967 war they left, and despite hasty efforts to complete the house ("the roof was put on in 15 days"), it was confiscated. After a successful application for "family reunification," the couple was able to return in 1974 to find their house with "all the bullet holes ...the Star of David and a sign that it was absentee property [all] on the wall." The Husseinis were able to reclaim their property with the help of an Israeli lawyer.

The post-1967 history of the remaining Lifta village property abounds with legal battles over ownership and building rights. A core confrontation in the area has been

between Liftawis and Hebrew University concerning a series of nine houses wedged below the university's high-rise dormitories, directly opposite from the Hyatt Hotel. In 1968 the Israeli government had confiscated the land and the houses, and subsequently sold them to the University. The Liftawis unsuccessfully challenged the confiscation orders in court in 1973 and 1977. Yet the confiscation orders were never executed, nor did the Liftawis accept the compensation offered to them. This "stalemate," so to speak, came to an end in April 1998. Two months prior to the automatic annulment of a 25-year-old outstanding confiscation order (under Israeli law), Hebrew University declared its intention to build on the land. According to a resident, a successful media campaign supported by Azmi Bishara (MK) put enough pressure on the University for it to back off for now.

Suheila Aqel, another resident, noted that the university subsequently sent a letter to the residents informing them that they were living on university property, but would not be forcibly evicted. The residents vowed never to move. As the alleged occupiers of "confiscated" property, the Liftawis have been prohibited from renovating and improving their houses and properties since 1968. "Protecting our land," said Suheila Aqel, "is a sacrifice."

Unlike the quest to hold on to pockets of "Lifta land," the recent history of the people of Issawiyya has been the attempt to break out of its geographical and infrastructural isolation, to not only reverse the process of the "unmaking" of the socialized spaces of a village but to transform the village into an urban

neighborhood. Issawiyya is an old Palestinian village, its dominant *hamulas* (Darwish, Abu Hummous, Aliyyan) trace their village genealogies back to the sixteenth century. Today it is home to about 7,000 people, most of whom work as laborers, cleaners and drivers in the city of Jerusalem. Nestled behind Hebrew University and Hadassa Hospital, the village was virtually sealed off between 1948 and 1967. During the day, according to Darwish Darwish, villagers were monitored whenever they left the village by car, and at night the Israeli police would block the road and villagers were only permitted to leave on foot for emergency reasons. It was only when a pregnant woman was in labor during the night that they were allowed to take a car to a nearby hospital. After 1967 Issawiyya lost 666 dunams for the construction of French Hill. The subsequent municipal involvement in the development of French Hill as a vibrant urban space and the continued marginalization of an old Palestinian village situated on the boundaries of an urban metropolis radicalized a younger generation of Palestinians in Issawiyya.

The Committee to Develop Issawiyya emerged as a pressure group to activate or force the municipality to participate in the development of the village/neighborhood. Due to the committee's perseverance a new sewage system was installed recently, and a new water system remains on the agenda. Together with the municipality the Committee has been able to open a youth center and a public library. However, these public institutions are housed in old village buildings. Not only has the municipality not given permits for new buildings in

Issawiyya, it has also refused to allow "Palestinian" municipal institutions to be erected upon the eight plots of village land zoned for public purposes, the infamous green areas. And herein lie the ideologically unresolved tensions between the Israeli municipality and the Palestinian village/urban neighborhood. Besides the stark visual contrast between "developed" French Hill and "underdeveloped" Issawiyya, there are questions of vision and definitions of space. According to Darwish Darwish, before 1948 the village of Issawiyya was spread over 10,000 dunams, from modern day Hadassa Hospital down to the Red Khan on the Jericho Road. Today 2,600 dunams remain, 2,000 dunams of which are considered "green areas" by the Israeli municipality. The municipality's plan for the village is for a historical construct whose only modern references are the road systems that can be accessed by way of French Hill. The Palestinian "villagers," with their structural functions in a modern urban economy, demand the kind of municipal urban infrastructural development found in other neighborhoods in the city. Thus the Committee would like to see the construction not just of private houses, but of real municipal sites on the 2,600 dunams of land remaining in Issawiyya.

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18

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TABLE RONDE

Monique Chemillier-Gendreau, Burhan Ghalioun, Farouk Mardam-Bey, Elias Sanbar, : Situation régionale, Accords de Wye River, un horizon alarmant

DOCUMENT

Le Mémoire de Wye River
Kathleen Christison : La politique américaine et la question palestinienne
Youssef Courbage : Redistribution des cartes démographiques au Proche-Orient
Polémique : Azmi Bishara bouscule la gauche israélienne
Maghfour El-Hassane : L'eau du bassin du Jourdain

CHRONIQUES

Ilan Halevi, Simone Bitton, Dominique Eddé

NOTES DE LECTURE

R. El-Kareh, J.-C. Pons, M. Dumper, E. Deniz Akarli

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