

Amman as Jerusalem's Alter Ego? Or How to Write about Jerusalem's Past Futures

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Abstract

After 1948, in a development that abides to its own geographical, socio-economic, and political context, Amman has gradually become what Jerusalem could not: an Arab metropolis. It did so, in part, by absorbing a significant number of Palestinian refugees, many of whom lived in the official camps established by the United Nations and others who did not. The latter included a significant number of the educated middle class who resided in neighborhoods outside the Old City walls, and who played a major role in the administrative, commercial, and cultural sectors of Amman in the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to its own destiny, then, Amman can also be taken to represent the aborted destiny of Jerusalem and thereby offers an opportunity to observe part of the potential that Jerusalem embodied before the Nakba. Indeed, the Jordanian capital somehow seems to have become the temporary conservatory of a Jerusalemite Palestinian Arab modernity nipped in the bud in 1948.

Keywords:

Amman; Jerusalem; Nakba; modernity; middle class.

The past carries a secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection. Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? Is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today?

Walter Benjamin, "On the
Concept of History"¹

As social historians, we are inhabited by the people whose stories we hear or read. It is as though they accompany us, commenting and pointing their fingers as we walk through life. Walking through the streets of Amman, I heard voices whispering to me, pointing at houses and telling me that they looked a lot like the Jerusalem homes they had been forced to leave in 1948. I smelled the perfume of Zalatimo's *mutabbaq* coming out of fancy pastry stores nothing like the original Zalatimo shop behind the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The voices asked me: Can you see it? Can you smell it? Slowly, I began to experience Amman differently. I began to think that this big city had links with Jerusalem that went beyond the obvious.

After 1948, in a development that abides to its own geographical, socio economic, and political context, Amman has gradually become what Jerusalem could not: an Arab metropolis. So, in some ways, in addition to its own destiny, Amman also represents what I call (taking a cue from Lena Jayyusi's *Jerusalem Interrupted*) the aborted destiny of Jerusalem.² Amman offers an opportunity to see part of the potential that Jerusalem embodied before the Nakba. Indeed, the Jordanian capital somehow seems to have become the temporary conservatory of a Jerusalemite Palestinian Arab modernity nipped in the bud in 1948.

Emboldened by the value that Janet Abu-Lughod attributed to induction in scientific endeavors in her *Grounded Theory* and inspired by Salim Tamari's multifaceted social history of Jerusalem, I decided to think more about this question and research its various dimensions. In this essay, which focuses specifically on the links between Amman and Jerusalem's western neighborhoods, there is some groundwork for future research concerning those links, namely questions that could be its starting points.³ Of course, beyond intuition, there were numerous elements that led me to consider the particular relationship between Amman and Jerusalem, two cities that are separated by only seventy kilometers. Jordan's annexation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, during the period of the "union of the two banks" (1950–67), brought the truncated city under the dominance of Amman.⁴ Amman remained the undisputed capital of Jordan, although Jerusalem was declared the spiritual capital and even the second capital of the kingdom.⁵ The more than eighteen years under a common political umbrella were marked by great mobility between the two banks, with "East Bank" families spending weekends and holidays in Jerusalem. On weekends, some would have lunch in Jerusalem and return to Amman in the evening.⁶

Most importantly, we know that a large number of Palestinian families from Jerusalem's new western neighborhoods migrated to Amman as a result of the Nakba. In the first four decades of the twentieth century, the Palestinian Arab middle class and emerging elite had built homes in Jerusalem's sparsely populated western areas. Mostly educated in foreign schools, many members of this class held leading positions in either the private or public sector during the Mandate years. After the war of 1948 and the subsequent division of the city, Jerusalem lost its status as a political capital and an economic hub, while Amman concentrated on

those functions for the Hashemite Kingdom on both sides of the Jordan River.⁷ The city was thus a logical choice for Jerusalemite professionals seeking employment in their fields of expertise and a stable income for their families, after the dramatic loss of their homes and livelihoods. Indeed, statistics on 1948 refugees from what later became West Jerusalem show that Jordan was their second choice of refuge, after east Jerusalem and the West Bank.⁸ This data, analyzed by Salim Tamari, excludes some middle-class families who did not register with UNRWA and so probably represents an underestimation of the total number of west Jerusalem refugees who ended up in Amman. Given the greater employment opportunities in the Jordanian capital, it is reasonable to assume that the majority left for Amman.

The many facets of this lifeworld that disappeared with Arab west Jerusalem in 1948 are examined in *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and their Fate in the War*, which documents these neighborhoods in their social, cultural, and economic dimensions. In the introduction, Salim Tamari writes: “This book is an attempt to provide a reconstruction of this process of displacement and expulsion and to account for the fate of Arab Palestinians who lost not only their property and homes, but also a whole world that exemplified Jerusalem and Palestine before 1948.”⁹ Where did this world disappear to? Did it reappear somewhere, though in fragments? And could that place be Amman, the “much-maligned city” (to use Seteney Shami’s expression)?¹⁰ Before analyzing the traces of Jerusalem’s modernity in Amman, it is important to try and take the measure what was lost in 1948.

Tender Buds of Cosmopolitan Arab Modernity

In the late Ottoman period, many Palestinian Arab families had left the Old City and moved to new neighborhoods outside of the walls. While several *a‘yan* (notables) and the *ashraf* (descendants of nobility) had established family residencies in Shaykh Jarrah and Wadi al-Jawz, members of the emerging Arab Palestinian middle class (along with Greek and Armenian Palestinians) began to move to the Qatamun, Talbiyya, and Baq‘a neighborhoods (known also as Wadi al-Ward) west of the Old City in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Nammari and Wa‘ri quarters in upper and lower Baq‘a were among the first to be established in that part of the city, in parallel with Jewish, Templer, and monastic communities.¹¹ The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in particular had a significant amount of waqf land west of the Old City and rented or leased it to clergy and lay members of the community, a practice that was also prevalent in the Armenian church.¹² David Yellin, a member of the Ottoman municipal council of Jerusalem, provided a snapshot of construction activities in the city for the year 1900, most of which occurred in the “new city.” According to him, Christian families constructed the most expensive homes.¹³

During the Mandate period, there was a building boom in Palestinian cities that indicated a particularly high level of investment in Jerusalem. In 1931, 1.8

million Palestinian pounds were invested in building works in Jerusalem, compared to a little less than 200,000 in Haifa and 175,000 in Tel Aviv.¹⁴ The new city's Talbiyya, al-Namamra, Qatamun, and Baq'a neighborhoods drew a large part of this investment, as families spent years saving money to buy a plot of land and build a house. These neighborhoods were made up of large family homes, many surrounded by lush gardens. Hala Sakakini, the daughter of the famous Palestinian educator and intellectual Khalil Sakakini, who grew up in Talbiyya, recalls that "every house had individuality; somehow it was marked by the personality of the owner."¹⁵ Homes were generally surrounded by a stone fence and the gates leading to the front yard were often ornate and decorative. Houses had no numbers and were frequently known by the owners' family name: Villa Salama was the home of Hanna Salama, the commercial agent of General Motors. Other families chose historical names for their houses, such as Hanna Ibrahim Bisharat, who called his home Villa Harun al-Rashid.¹⁶

Rochelle Davis points out that a "material expression of the family's investment in building a home was often the highly individualized architectural detail, creative stone cutting around doors and windows, stylized facades, and elaborate stonework."¹⁷ These homes did not imitate Old City architecture: rather than domed roofs, they often had red tile or flat roofs. Davis's historical approach allows her to grasp the ambitions expressed by the residents of these homes. This contrasts with the essentialist and sectarian interpretation employed by Israeli architect David Kroyanker, who has carefully documented the fine architecture of these neighborhoods in a detailed website and several books.¹⁸ Kroyanker's approach is very far from the cosmopolitan modernist referent that many of the Arab residents of west Jerusalem called their own, whether they were Christians or Muslims.

Indeed, Talbiyya, al-Namamra, Qatamun, and Baq'a witnessed the development of what Davis calls "bourgeois modernity": cafés, cinemas, and social, literary, and sports clubs sprang up in great numbers during the Mandate period.¹⁹ According to British statistics, by 1945 more than two thousand clubs and charities had been founded in Jerusalem, 85 percent of which were Palestinian of all denominations; only 15 percent were foreign.²⁰ Among the latter, the Jerusalem YMCA on King George Street, founded in 1933, was an important venue for leisure, sports, and socializing for Jerusalem's emergent middle class and is frequently mentioned in autobiographic accounts of life in the city's western neighborhoods, such as Hala Sakakini's memoirs.²¹ The Arab Orthodox Club in upper Baq'a, founded in 1926, and the Arab Sports Club in Qatamun were two other important sites of this modern bourgeois lifestyle.²² Cinemas and cafés provided evening entertainment; Jerusalem counted eight cinemas by the end of the Mandate period.²³ Ghada Karmi, who grew up in the Baq'a neighborhood, recalls the Jewish-owned Zion cinema and the Arab-owned Rex Cinema, and also Viennese-style cafés.²⁴ As Davis writes, "These suburban living areas were part of the expression of a rising middle-class and a new 'modern' value system, including an emphasis on education and public life."²⁵

The Violent Abortion of the Budding Metropolis

By 1947, the Arab neighborhoods in south Jerusalem stood at approximately 22,000 inhabitants, 13,000 of whom were Christian (the vast majority of whom were Arab, but also there were Greek, Armenian, and other European Christians), 9,000 Muslims, and 550 Jews.²⁶ They were among the areas that were attacked by Zionist paramilitary groups and militia from late 1947 onward, along with Jerusalem district villages such as Lifta and Shaykh Badr.²⁷ In Qatamun, the Haganah bombing of the Semiramis Hotel on 4 January 1948, which killed twenty-six civilians, signaled the beginning of an outright bombing campaign in the course of which many families decided to – temporarily, as they hoped – leave the city. But the massacre of Dayr Yasin on 9 April 1948 was the decisive shock that convinced most of the remaining inhabitants to flee. As Kroyanker recalls:

I lived not far from here [Talbiyya]. Dayr Yasin had a huge influence on the evacuation of Talbiyya. The Arabs were scared to death. They left their meals on their tables and the Haganah requested people in our neighborhood to clean the houses so that Jews could move into them. There really were meals on the tables. The Arabs thought it was a matter of two or three days before they would return to their homes, as had happened in 1936 and 1939.²⁸

In keeping with Plan Dalet, the Zionist military plan devised in 1944 that “aimed to enlarge the boundaries allotted to the Jewish state and simultaneously conquer dozens of villages from which the Palestinian Arab inhabitants would be expelled,” the homes and businesses belonging to Palestinian Arabs were first settled by Jews and were later declared absentee property.²⁹ Widespread looting was documented in these areas, as refugees from west Jerusalem lost everything they owned. UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte described their dire situation:

While those who left in the early days of the conflict had been able to take with them some personal effects and assets, many of the latecomers were deprived of everything except the clothes in which they stood, and apart from their homes (many of which were destroyed) lost all furniture and assets and even their tools of trade.³⁰

The Palestinian population of west Jerusalem – altogether about thirty thousand people – fled first to the Old City of Jerusalem and then some of them gradually left for other destinations, Amman being one of the most important.³¹ Many decided to stay in areas adjacent to the homes they had lost, in what is now East Jerusalem, sometimes living in areas where they could see their property.³²

The migration to Amman was primarily a response to the war-time loss of property and capital, but Jerusalem’s loss of status and functions after its annexation by Jordan presented an additional obstacle to displaced Palestinians’ desire to rebuild their

lives and livelihoods. After more than two decades of being a colonial capital and administrative center, Jordanian-administered Jerusalem had been stripped of its ministries and higher administration offices and lacked employment opportunities for the educated elite.³³ Amman became a strong magnet for this elite.

While Jerusalem lost much of its former status under Jordanian administration, the city did continue to have its place in its Arab environment and was even an important crossroads for regional and international mobility. Until 1967, Jerusalem had a civil airport linking the city to major Arab capitals and facilitating tourism and pilgrimage. Built by the British army on land north of Jerusalem and east of Qalandiya village in 1925, it was primarily used as a military airport until the end of the Mandate. Under Jordanian jurisdiction it was upgraded and became a civil airport.³⁴ A little-known comprehensive urban plan for East Jerusalem under Jordanian rule submitted to the municipal council and to the Jordanian government in 1963 advocated further enlargement of Jerusalem's airport to handle jet aircraft.³⁵ The Jerusalem airport was actually used by two-thirds of all tourists heading to Jordan (including the West Bank) in the mid-1960s.³⁶

Nahed Awwad documented the history of this airport through interviews and private archives of former airport employees:

In the left wing of the building there were counters for the main airlines: Air Liban and Middle East Airline ... Misr Air (Egypt Air), Trans Arabia Airline (the Kuwaiti Airline, to carry the big wave of Palestinians traveling to work in the Gulf in the fifties), and Air Jordan of the Holy Land (now Royal Jordanian). There was also a royal room, used mostly by King Hussein on his frequent visits to the airport, and for welcoming important guests.³⁷

The 1967 war and subsequent military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem closed this "gateway to the world" that had allowed Palestinians to stay connected to the Arab world and beyond, using Jerusalem as the point of departure.³⁸ It was also the end of direct access to Palestinian Jerusalem for international tourists and pilgrims, among them many Arabs. The closing of this airport had a devastating effect on West Bank Palestinians in general, and for Jerusalem it shattered any remaining hopes to maintain a close link to the Arab world and the ambition of becoming an Arab metropolis.

Today, Palestinians of the West Bank have only Queen Alia International Airport in Amman for air travel, since they are not permitted to use Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Queen Alia Airport was built in 1983 to meet Amman's increasing needs as a crossroads of mobility for the Mashreq and as an important tourist destination, which Marka Airport could no longer handle. There has been a reversal of roles between Amman and Jerusalem: whereas Jerusalem functioned as the main airport for both banks of the Jordan River until 1967, today Amman is the only gateway to the world for West Bank Palestinians.

Beyond a Site of Refuge

Modern Amman is known for having been a migrant village at the end of the nineteenth century, settled by Circassian refugees who were relocated by the Ottoman authorities in an attempt to increase security in what was to become Transjordan a few decades later. The city's refoundation narrative is thus inextricably linked to the narrative of Ammani Circassian identity, as Seteney Shami has pointed out.³⁹ These were not the only migrants who left an important mark on the city, though. While everyone is ready to admit that Palestinian refugees arriving after 1948 had an immense impact on the city, this impact is seen primarily as that of poor refugees settling in camps.

Since late Ottoman times, however, merchant migrants from Palestine and Syria have played an important role in the development of Amman as a city. This role only increased during the Mandate years and after the Palestinian Nakba. For example, one of the first mayors of Amman in the early twentieth century was the Damascene merchant Sa'id Khayr (1920–25).⁴⁰ Another important institution of urban development was the Amman Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1923. In the early 1940s it had twelve members, five of whom were Syrians and four Palestinians.⁴¹

Links across the Jordan River have always been strong, even before the eruption of colonialism and war, but the Nakba of 1948 marks a watershed. With the arrival of Palestinian refugees, Amman's population grew by almost 60 percent in three years: from 61,500 in 1948 to 97,500 in 1951.⁴² In addition to becoming a city of refuge in 1948, Amman gradually evolved into the alter ego of post-Nakba western Jerusalem, ethnically cleansed of its Arab inhabitants. While most of the Jerusalemite refugees were impoverished, having lost their homes, businesses, and other properties, many arrived with cultural capital and a level of education that facilitated employment in the administration of the newly independent Jordanian state or in the private sector. Palestinian professionals who had been employed in the public sector in British Mandate Jerusalem indeed brought with them an experience of the same administrative system that had left a strong influence in Jordan. A detailed prosopography of these spheres is needed to trace their career paths and evaluate their significance.⁴³

In the expanding neighborhoods of Jabal Amman (first known as Jabal Jadid) and Jabal al-Luwaybda, the new home to many of these families, we can see beginning from the early 1950s some of the characteristics of Jerusalem's new city lifestyle, notably in terms of architecture. Modern villas in Jabal Amman and Jabal al-Luwaybda date from that period, when one of Amman's key architects at the time was Nasri Muqhar from Jerusalem.⁴⁴ These are partial hints of links that would need study by specialists of architectural history. Other elements, however, do not necessitate a specialist's eye. The British Mandate era's restrictions limiting buildings to two stories and imposing the use of white limestone on the outer walls of buildings in Jerusalem were meant to preserve the image Mandate administrators had of the "medieval" and "holy" city, but they were also applied east of the Jordan and have thus contributed to shaping the image of Amman.⁴⁵

The other important elements imported from Jerusalem to Amman were educational



أسرة ترسانطة/عمان وأول باص للكلية عام ١٩٤٩

Figure 1. “The Terra Santa family, Amman, first school bus, 1949,” online at: www.terrasanta.edu.jo/old-pictures-gallery (accessed 24 January 2025).

and cultural institutions. In the immediate aftermath of the 1948 war, institutions such as Terra Santa College (Jabal al-Luwaybda, 1949), College De La Salle (Jabal Husayn, 1950), and the Orthodox Club opened branches in Amman. Terra Santa school, which was established in western Jerusalem’s King George Street in the late 1920s, was an important institution for Jerusalem’s Arab families. In the aftermath of the war of 1948, with many of the school’s students finding themselves in Amman, the school’s administration decided to open a branch there to ensure the continuity of their education.⁴⁶

On the Orthodox Club, Norig Neveu points out:

The arrival in Jordan of Palestinian members of the Orthodox associations was a turning point in the life of the community there ... Palestinian notables brought to Jordan new associative models they had already developed in Palestine. Thanks to their expertise and networks they opened new cultural associations and clubs, mainly in Amman.⁴⁷

While Jaffawi families played a decisive role in the development of the Orthodox Club in Amman, Jerusalem also had an Orthodox Club as early as 1926 and it was

there that the Orthodox Union Club saw the light in the early 1940s to unify local structures and provide administrative and symbolic leadership.⁴⁸ Indeed, the Orthodox intelligentsia was an important element of the social milieu of Jerusalem's western neighborhoods, exemplified by Khalil Sakakini.

More recently established, the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation represents another important element in the cultural and education spheres linking Jerusalem and Amman. Abdul Hameed Shoman, the son of a peasant family from Bayt Hanina, founded the Arab Bank in Jerusalem in 1930. The Amman branch opened its doors in 1934 and after the 1948 war Amman became the site of the bank's headquarters.⁴⁹ The Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation shows the important role played by the private sector, and particularly business and finance, in structuring the contribution of Palestinian families to Jordanian society. Founded in 1978 in the memory of the Arab Bank founder, and financed by the Arab Bank, this foundation has evolved into an essential actor in the promotion of culture, literacy, education, and scientific research in Jordan.

Zalatimo's Demise and Prosperity

This reflection started in the streets of the old heart of Amman – Jabal al-Luwaybda and Jabal Amman – and has been nourished by impressions, individual and institutional trajectories, and anecdotal information. Can the cumulative effect of these elements help reconstruct the image of Jerusalem as a potential Arab metropolis, aborted in 1948? And is the story of the Zalatimo pastry shop relevant to this project of historiographic construction?

The first time I entered a Zalatimo pastry shop was in Amman in 2013. I was struck by the images chosen to decorate their fancy textile bags and their round box of *za'tar*: Petra's Treasury next to the Dome of the Rock. This mixture of symbolism speaks of the trajectory of this family-owned pastry shop, from Jerusalem's Old City to Amman. In 2016, I was lucky to have also had the opportunity to taste the famed *mutabbaq* pastry with walnuts in the small, rudimentary Zalatimo shop in Khan al-Zayt, right next to the stairway behind the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. A true witness to history, this pastry shop was first opened in 1860 by Muhammad Zalatimo after he returned from serving in the Ottoman army. I was greeted by a huge old oven, a few plastic tables and chairs, and mildew eating the vaulted ceiling, before the smell of syrup poured on the hot pastry tray shut out all other senses. In 2019, Hani Zalatimo decided to close the shop: one possible reason was that he was forbidden to conduct any restoration works in his small shop (a factor glaringly absent from a *Haaretz* article on the subject, although this is an all too common problem for Palestinian residents and businesses in the Old City of Jerusalem).⁵⁰

The Amman branch was established in 1986 by Muhammad Zalatimo's grandson 'Abdallah. 'Abdallah was unable to return to Jerusalem after studying marketing in the United States (possibly because his residency was revoked by the Israeli Ministry of the Interior), so, as the Zalatimo website explains, "Amman, Jordan, was the logical option."⁵¹ Zalatimo and Zalatimo brothers have been hugely successful and



Figure 2. Zalatimo's maamoul, online at zalatimo.com/en/products/maamoul-assrt-pistachios-walnuts-dates (accessed 24 January 2025).

have expanded rapidly into the Gulf. Middle-class sociability in Amman has made Zalatimo a favorite brand, and its fancy wood and metal boxes with varieties of pastries are a preferred gift to bring along for visits. Zalatimo could not thrive in the Israeli-occupied Old City of Jerusalem, although this was its original environment; it is in Amman that sweets craft and a good business sense pushed Zalatimo to the top.

Amman might also be the logical option for “the chronicler, who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and small, [and] thereby accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history.”⁵² Jerusalem's unfulfilled modernity does not have to be lost to history if historiography seizes its own potential to stand up to facts on the ground.⁵³

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Endnotes

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- 13 Davis, “Ottoman Jerusalem,” 22.
- 14 Rochelle Davis, “The Growth of the Western Communities,” in Tamari, *Jerusalem 1948*, 34.
- 15 Hala Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I: A Personal Record* (Amman: Economic Press, 1990) 105, as cited in Alon Confino, “Beween Talbiya and Me,” in *Israel-Palestine: Lands and Peoples*, ed. Omer Bartov (New York: Berghahn, 2021), 409.
- 16 Confino, “Beween Talbiya and Me,” 412. See also George Bisharat, “Talbiyah Days: At Villa Harun ar-Rashid,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 30 (Spring 2007): 88–98.
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- 18 Kroyanker reads Jerusalem’s built heritage as that of a “cosmopolitan melting pot.” This patrimonialist discourse borders on whitewashing ethnic cleansing. It is also accompanied by a sectarian interpretation of the various “design identities” present in Jerusalem – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – with an additional one being called the “modern twentieth-century design identity.” Many of the “Arab homes” which he lists in his database, “Jerusalem – Multicultural Design Motifs,” online at jerudesign.org/ (accessed 19 November 2024) actually contain at least one element of the latter, reflecting the secular convictions of many of the residents of Qatamun, Baq’a, and Talbiyya. See also David Kroyanker, *Jerusalem Architecture* (New York: Vendome Press, 2003).
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