LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

Behind the Big Blue Gate

The Kenyon Institute, a British Eccentricity in Shaykh Jarrah

Mandy Turner

We passed by the home of the beloved but the enemy’s laws and wall turned us away. I said to myself, “Maybe, that is a blessing.”

What will you see in Jerusalem when you visit?

You will see all that you can’t stand when her houses become visible from all sides.

When meeting her beloved, not every soul rejoices

Nor does every absence harm

If they are delighted when meeting before departure

such joy cannot remain kindled

For once your eyes have seen Jerusalem

You will only see her, wherever you look.

part of

In Jerusalem

by Tamim al-Barghouti

trans. Houssem Ben Lazreg

Abstract

The Kenyon Institute based in Shaykh Jarrah has a long history. Established during the British occupation of Jerusalem in 1919, it was an exemplar of the marriage of academia and empire. In its early days, as the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, it was biblical, British, and very imperial, but this outlook and reputation changed over time. This essay by a former director (January 2012–December 2019) provides a brief history of the institute, and discusses the recent changes in its character and relationship with the local community. The author also reflects on some personal experiences and thoughts about her time living and working in East Jerusalem.

Keywords

Kenyon Institute; British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem; British Mandate; British academia in Palestine; Shaykh Jarrah; East Jerusalem.

Behind the big blue gate sits the Kenyon Institute. In a prime location in East Jerusalem, on top of the hill in Shaykh Jarrah, just minutes from the famous American Colony Hotel, it peeps out over Wadi al-Jawz and then sweeps its gaze up to the Mount of Olives. A tall wall, covered with pink bougainvillea dripping with flowers, keeps it hidden from the road. When you enter the gate and climb the steps, a traditional Palestinian garden hugs the pathway up to a charming Ottoman building.
Endowed by the Murad family, and held in trust for them by the Jerusalem Islamic Awqaf since 1967, it once served as the residence of the British Consul General. It looks magnificent on the outside but suffers from multiple problems on the inside. A bit like Jerusalem itself. And yet I loved both. Loved or love? Is it in the past tense? Probably not. Because while you might leave Jerusalem, it never leaves you. I know that now, six months after leaving both for good.

Figure 1. “The big blue gate: the Kenyon Institute’s entrance in Shaykh Jarrah,” photo by T. Haddad, July 2020.

In January 2012, I became the director of the Kenyon Institute. This British academic research center had a long history but hardly anyone outside of the archaeology community knew about it, and very few were aware of what lay behind the big blue gate, at least not in the most recent decades. I had only learned of its existence a few years earlier, although I had been visiting Jerusalem for years, often residing in St. George’s Cathedral Guest House, just a stone’s throw away. But once we became acquainted, I fell in love with its “times-gone-by” ambience: the age-yellowed letter to King George VI hanging askew in the entrance salon, pieces of archaeology casually idling around the garden that cried out for attention, and its dilapidated buildings requiring repair. Some of it was less loveable: the lack of heating that meant we all froze in the winter, and the power outages that plunged us into darkness on occasion. But all of these aspects, and more, contributed to its other-worldly atmosphere.
I began the job full of dreams and plans: of taking the institute in new directions, opening it up to the community, working with local organizations, and making our name known to researchers far and wide. I was excited about living and working in Jerusalem. What a dream! And yet I do not think I really knew what I was getting myself into, even though I was an experienced researcher of the situation and a frequent visitor to Jerusalem. No amount of reading or short visits prepares you for what you confront as a resident.

Because Jerusalem is a place of dreams, but also of nightmares. It just depends on which side you live of Highway 60, the road that runs somewhat up the route of the 1948 “green line” and has physically erased it. Quite simply, Palestinian East Jerusalem is neglected and marginalized, its inhabitants treated like a hostile fifth column, aggressively policed, and subjected to unwanted Israeli settler expansion. I knew these sad facts and had even seen much of this when I had visited in the past. But for eight years I witnessed the way in which Israel’s occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem burrows deep into every aspect of life, gnawing away at the capacity of Palestinians to survive and thrive, occasionally provoking despair or defiance, though more commonly greeted with quiet resignation. Because to endure it you need to remain calm despite constant provocation.
My memory is full of images that capture the beauty of Jerusalem: the cobbled streets of the Old City; the luminous limestone of the buildings; the spectacular vistas from Mount Scopus and Mount of Olives; the bustle of the believers from the three monotheistic religions making their way to their respective places of worship; the tangerine tint of the Mediterranean sun as it rises over al-Quds (Jerusalem’s Arabic name, literally, “The Holy”), and many more. Yet, my memories are also full of images that capture Jerusalem’s ugliness: the paramilitary Israeli Border Police positioned at intersections in East Jerusalem strip-searching and humiliating shabab (young Palestinian men) just for fun; the Israeli settlers with machine guns casually slung over their shoulders arrogantly barging round the Muslim and Christian quarters of the
Old City like they own the place; the triumphalist racist anti-Arab demonstrations on “Jerusalem Day”; and the Palestinian families thrown out onto the streets by settlers who had taken over their homes. Beautiful and bewitching – cruel and callous. Both are true of the Jerusalem I saw. The first image of Jerusalem is the one you experience as a tourist, the second, an experience reserved for Palestinians. It seemed a sort of Jekyll and Hyde duality, with Israel’s occupation and annexation the ingredients of the evil potion.

Excavating the Colonial Past, Crafting an Anti-colonial Present

The Kenyon Institute began life as the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (BSAJ) in 1919 during the British occupation. It was established by the British Academy and the Palestine Exploration Fund via a committee whose membership included religious figures, academics, and government officials. The Palestine Exploration Fund played a key role in the British colonial enterprise, providing maps and collecting intelligence on the region in the late nineteenth century. Academia and empire went hand in hand; and in this case quite literally, in terms of personnel. John Garstang, professor of archaeology at Liverpool University, was the first director of the BSAJ as well as the director of the Department of Antiquities in the British Mandate of Palestine. In its early days, the BSAJ was biblical, British, and very imperial. Its initial purpose was to train archaeologists and to dig in the Holy Land and, until 1967, it had also been responsible for archaeological fieldwork in Jordan and Syria.

The BSAJ moved to Shaykh Jarrah just before that fateful 1967 war that initiated the occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem, and brought the school and our Palestinian neighbors under the direct control and jurisdiction of Israel. This caused us problems, intellectually as well as practically, because our gaze and focus has always been towards the Arab world. Intellectually, other than Kathleen Kenyon’s work on the city’s biblical past, our scholarship after those early days has largely concentrated on exploring the city’s Islamic monuments including the Dome of the Rock, al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as surveys of Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman Jerusalem. Practically, we had a strange “non-status” which meant we had to pay large legal fees to obtain visas for our researchers and on occasion had to take the Israeli Ministry of Interior to court to get them. We even had researchers denied entry and deported but we were never able to do anything about it. No diplomatic mission seems to want to take on the “right” of Israel to deny entry to people of Palestinian heritage or those who campaign for Palestinian rights.

I know these are molehills compared to the mountains of problems for Palestinians and local institutions, which have gotten worse over recent years. But these issues kept me busy and our already meagre budget overstretched; it also gave our board of trustees based in the UK excuses to continually debate about whether to close us down.

During Kenyon’s time as director (1948–70), the BSAJ had excellent links with
Palestinian universities and was seen as an important cultural presence in East Jerusalem; but this was disrupted by Israel’s occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem. It took decades for us to find our feet again.
The BSAJ changed its name in 1998 (although the building did not change its name until 2001) to reflect the extension of its research remit beyond just archaeology to include humanities and social science subjects. The new name acknowledged our important heritage, that of Kathleen Kenyon, the British archaeologist world-famous for her excavations in Jericho. Purportedly Kenyon was a “bit of a character” with enormous enthusiasm, a sense of humor, a warm and generous heart, and a reputation for being anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian. It was also said that she enjoyed a tipple or two. We seem to have had a fair amount of “interesting characters” in our history. I heard plenty of stories about eccentricities and bizarre incidents including one involving a former director and another employee, an uncomfortably large consumption of whisky, a quarrel over poetry, and a confrontation around the big kitchen table with a rather large medieval sword. Do not worry, it did not end badly. I also had a couple of odd experiences, revelations of which are also best kept for an amusing storytelling session on the institute’s entrance terrace.

Despite our lack of cash and limited staff, we were determined to help defend and enhance intellectual life in East Jerusalem and further afield. It is clear that Israel has been trying to destroy Palestinian East Jerusalem for a long time, through underfunding and neglect. And yet the city had, until relatively recently, continued to serve as a vibrant hub for Palestinian culture. The second intifada and the building of the Wall disrupted this. (Referred to variously as the “Separation Wall/Barrier” [by the UN], the “Security Barrier/West Bank Barrier” [by Israel], or the “Apartheid Wall” [by Palestinians], it is yet another one of the more visible surveillance mechanisms, restrictions on movement, and land-grabbing techniques used by Israel against Palestinians.) Thereafter al-Quds was denied its lifeblood – visitors and patrons – as Israel restricted access to it for Palestinians from the occupied territories who did not have East Jerusalem ID cards. This also affected our institute. The library, which houses some rare books on the history and archeology of Jerusalem, became inaccessible for Palestinian scholars and students with West Bank ID cards. And for Palestinians in Gaza, a visit to al-Quds was virtually impossible.

When I joined the institute we responded by joining forces with prestigious East Jerusalem organizations – the Educational Bookshop, Dar al-Tifl al-‘Arabi, the Khalidi Library, al-Ma’mal Foundation, and al-Hakawati Theatre. We also created partnerships with universities and cultural institutions across the occupied West Bank. Collectively we organized lectures, book launches and conferences showcasing local and international academics, authors, and artists, mostly with just our own labor and shoestring budgets but occasionally with funding from international donor missions and cultural charities.

I am particularly proud of two events we organized. The first was a one-day conference on the Balfour Declaration held on the centenary anniversary of its announcement. Organized by us and our constant partners, the Educational Bookshop, it took place in the Palestinian National Theatre (al-Hakawati). It seemed significant and historic for a British institution, whose own origin was due to Britain’s murky imperial past, to partner with a Palestinian organization to hold an event in East Jerusalem. 
Jerusalem on a decision that changed the course of history for Palestinians. It was one of the most shameful colonial policies of Perfidious Albion, although there are ample to choose from. Despite attempts by the Israeli authorities to prevent the conference taking place, an audience of around four hundred people gathered to listen and engage with ten leading international and local historians, and a keynote speech by the foremost historian of the period, Professor Avi Shlaim of Oxford University.

Buoyed by the success of “Balfour 100,” the following year we organized a five-day travelling literature festival called Kalimat with writing workshops and public readings in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Haifa, and Nablus. I have fond memories of us and our Educational Bookshop friends chaperoning the fourteen writers around in a minibus, whisking them between cultural visits, historical tours, and their performance events. It was exhausting but exhilarating, and the participants seemed to enjoy it, although not perhaps the experience of the military roadblock and midnight stop and search at an Israeli checkpoint.

Together we were stronger: combining our resources, contacts, and specialisms to help keep Palestinian East Jerusalem, al-Quds, culturally and intellectually alive. We did what we could. But it was a drop in the ocean. Israel’s asphyxiation of Palestinian East Jerusalem is an integral part of its mission to create and ensure a Jewish majority in its “undivided capital.”
On the East Side of Highway 60

When I first moved into the neighborhood, the only Jewish-Israelis that set foot in Shaykh Jarrah were settlers and border police, and occasionally some leftist activists protesting against the settlements. This was because the “green line” had been physically erased but had not yet been mentally erased. For Jewish-Israelis, there was fear (but also curiosity) of what lay on the east side of Highway 60. And besides, there was no real reason for Jewish-Israelis to visit: the main languages spoken are Arabic and English, including at public events; you never heard Hebrew. But this was starting to change when I left. By then it was not uncommon to see Israelis wandering about. I did not mind curious friendly Israelis; some of them came to events at the institute and were very welcome. But I did mind the ones that crowded the pavement in front of our big blue gate waving Israeli flags at a recently erected black stone monument bearing the names of 77 people. The monument memorialized the massacre of Jewish medics making their way to Hadassah hospital across Jordanian military lines during the 1948 war. Each year, the numbers of Israelis visiting it grew. Honoring the dead is a good and decent thing to do, but this memorial had become a hotspot for Israeli groups using it to whip up anti-Palestinian sentiment. I know because I often nipped out past the big blue gate when I spotted them gathering, joining the groups by hiding at the back while silently listening in to the particular historical narrative provided by the guides. Their message was not just about the past, it was also about the present and the future – but in none of these temporal phases did they paint a picture of a Jerusalem that welcomed or wanted Palestinians.
Shaykh Jarrah was an elite neighborhood that housed some eminent Palestinian families: the Husaynis, Nashashibis, Khalidis, Jarallahs, and ‘Alamis; some of which have streets named after them. Earmarked to serve as the diplomatic quarter of a future Palestinian state, it hosts consular buildings, UN compounds, some grand residential homes and institutions such as Orient House, and more foreign residents than nearby areas. Yet, despite this elite past and international present, Shaykh Jarrah is also a site of intense contestation and Jewish-Israeli settlement activity.

The biggest problems that face Palestinians in East Jerusalem are caused by Israeli settlements. These have been built around Jerusalem as part of a clear strategy to cut East Jerusalem off from the rest of the West Bank and to make it difficult to divide the city. Israel insists on calling them “suburbs” or “neighborhoods,” chastising any media outlet that uses the term “settlement.” They are clearly illegal under international law because East Jerusalem is classified as occupied, although this attempt at name-subterfuge has helped to erase this fact in the collective Israeli imagination. In the north side of Jerusalem, near Shaykh Jarrah, the big settlements of Pisgat Ze’ev, Neve Yaakov, and Giv’at Shapira loom large. These were built on land expropriated from the Palestinian neighbourhoods of Shu‘fat, Hizma, al-Ram, Bayt Hanina, and al-‘Isawiyya. And then there are the smaller Israeli settlements, inserted right into the middle of Palestinian neighborhoods – such as Ma‘ale HaZeitim in Ras al-Amud, Elad in Silwan, and Shimon HatSadik in Shaykh Jarrah.

The settlement of Shimon HatSadik sits immediately opposite our institute. We could see the tattered Israeli flag hanging from the flagpole next to the portacabin of the settlement’s armed guard. Its emergence and development is a case study of how some Israeli settlements are created. Political activists, supported by a member of the Knesset, mobilized opinion and action to “reclaim” Shimon HatSadik on the basis that it holds religious significance as the purported site of the tomb of the Hebrew priest Simeon the Just. Legal cases were taken based on reclaiming ownership of Jewish properties that had been abandoned after 1948 when this part of Jerusalem was captured by Jordan. From the 1950s, these buildings had housed Palestinian refugees who during the Nakba had fled their homes that were now inside the “green line.” Well-funded settler organizations petitioned and paid for the legal actions and then Jewish residents were placed in the homes after the Palestinian residents were evicted and kicked out onto the street. Some of the homes taken over by settlers were built by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) during the Jordanian administration. The Israeli state, through the Ministry of Housing, thereafter paid for private security to protect the settlers. Little by little the settlement expanded as more court cases were won and evictions took place.

Lawyer friends often told me that these examples in Shaykh Jarrah could open the door for similar claims for restitution of Palestinian refugee properties in West Jerusalem and even inside the “green line.” Lawyers always seem optimistic that the law can be used to help the oppressed. But we are still waiting for this to happen in Shaykh Jarrah and in Jerusalem generally. I am not optimistic in the short term. The law supports the dominant force on this occasion.
Figure 7. Map from “The Case of Sheikh Jarrah,” the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory (UNOCHA), online at (ochaopt.org) bit.ly/3gxJOkV (accessed 27 August 2020).
Living opposite this Israeli settlement meant that I witnessed at close quarters the devastating impact it has had on the everyday lives of Palestinian residents. Time after time there were court cases and confiscations, house evictions and demolitions, the continual presence and harassment of the Israeli Border Police, and ultra-Orthodox religious celebrations where thousands poured into the neighborhood forcing Palestinian residents to stay indoors, afraid to go out. These were just the most visibly exhausting and debilitating experiences. My Palestinian neighbors feared for their future, especially those with teenage boys who saw all of this as provocation and had not yet developed the sense of fear that wracked their elders. Just before I left, a new Jewish settlement of 120 housing units was about to open on the site of the 1930s-built Shepherd Hotel originally owned by the Husayni family, but which had been expropriated by Israel and demolished in 2011. It just seemed relentless. The sense of powerlessness to halt this is overwhelming.
There is no doubt that Jerusalem is mystical and romantic; I loved my time there. But I also left it feeling angry and sad. The actions of Israel in its pursuit of an undivided capital against the wishes of Jerusalem’s Palestinian population are ugly and unjust. And it creates an atmosphere of opportunism and impunity. I witnessed the effects of Jewish-Israelis running amok in Palestinian neighborhoods, daubing racist graffiti on gates and walls, scratching paintwork and bursting car tires. One night, the teenage sons of a neighborhood friend caught two young Jewish men damaging their property and others in their street. They managed to lock them in the ground floor of their home and called the police. When the Israeli police arrived, one was overheard whispering to the criminals, “Just play along with us, we’ll get you out of here soon.” The officers forgot that Palestinians in East Jerusalem understand Hebrew, or maybe they just did not care because Palestinians have no voice there, and little recourse to the rule of law. In this case, as was often the way, there was no prosecution. Jewish settlers enjoy near impunity for any actions against Palestinians, so no one bothers reporting incidents to the police anymore.

Yet it is too easy to blame the settlers. They are not the only ones responsible because this is all sanctioned by the Israeli state, and supported by the majority of its politicians and the Jewish-Israeli public. The process and practice of alienating and separating Palestinians from their beloved al-Quds is quite simply discriminatory and grotesque.

Tamim al-Barghouti’s poem “In Jerusalem,” some lines of which serve as an epigraph to this piece, tells the story of an aborted taxi journey to Jerusalem. After it was published in 2007, al-Barghouti became a household name; almost every Palestinian, young and old, can recite the poem. It captured the popular imagination because it expresses the unrequited love that Palestinians feel for their capital city, al-Quds. It portrays a city that Palestinians love dearly but that today does not love them back, a city that excludes them but that is integral to their very being. This was crystal clear, even from behind the big blue gate, where nowadays the Kenyon Institute is not so hidden, nor separated from its Palestinian neighbors.


*Mandy Turner was the director of the Kenyon Institute from 2012 to 2019. She is currently professor of conflict, peace and humanitarian affairs at the University of Manchester, UK, and deputy director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute. The edited collection From the River to the Sea: Palestine and Israel in the Shadow of “Peace” (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019) is her most recent publication. She thanks her personal and professional friends in al-Quds, and the students and scholars that visited the Institute, for making her time there special.*