

EDITORIAL

Excavating Palestine

We are happy to present this first of two issues on archaeology in Palestine, focusing in part on the materiality of the archaeological enterprise from a unique and under-represented angle. As guest editor Salim Tamari notes in his introduction, we bring into focus “the hidden army of site diggers – the men, women, and children – as well as foremen, surveyors, builders, and labor contractors who were often photographed as the background setting for sites but whose voices are rarely heard.” The essays in these issues seek to situate archaeological excavation in its broader social context – the local knowledge, economic relations, and political sensitivities within which archaeology intervenes. The contributors to these issues not only reevaluate a number of archaeological sites in Palestine, but reaffirm that the preservation or neglect, reconstruction or destruction of sites is never only about their past significance, but about their meaning in the present – a meaning that is not only academic, but embedded in the social, economic, and political worlds of those who live and work in their vicinity. This is highlighted in Penny Johnson and Raja Shehadeh’s reflections on abandoned Palestinian holy sites, in this instance, the Nabi ‘Ukkasha mosque and tomb located in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in western Jerusalem, of all places.

This issue is further enhanced by pieces from Nadim Bawalsa, who writes on the struggle of diaspora Palestinians for the right to Palestinian citizenship during the Mandate, concluding that “the Palestinian struggle for a right of return began well before 1948”; and

from Thomas Ricks, who reflects on remembrance and memory, and the lessons for social historians as they try to navigate the various versions of traumatic events, most prominently the Nakba.

As this issue of *JQ* goes to press, the brutal colonial reality in which Palestinians in Palestine live continues to manifest itself in multitudes of ways. The murder of the widely admired and iconic Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in May continues to resonate and dominate the news, underlining the astounding impunity Israel enjoys among the powers that be, primarily the United States government. Despite several investigations by Palestinian and international organizations implicating the Israeli army in the killing of Abu Akleh, including one by the *New York Times*, justice continues to be out of reach. In early July, the U.S. State Department announced that “independent, third-party examiners, as part of a process overseen by the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC), could not reach a definitive conclusion regarding the origin of the bullet...” Despite the further flurry of activity around the case, it is entirely likely that the perpetrators of this crime, like so many before them, will not be held accountable.

While the killing of Abu Akleh occupied a prominent place in the media, another kind of less visible killing has been gathering momentum of late: that of Palestinian children targeted by the Israeli army. According to Defense for Children International, over eight hundred Palestinian children have been killed by the army since 2014, the highest number being recorded in May 2021, during what has been called the May unity uprising that engaged Palestinians from all over historic Palestine.

Israeli courts have also intensified the deployment of an old weapon of control, that of home incarceration for children. Between January 2018 and March 2022, some 2,200 home detention orders were issued, about half of which targeted children less than twelve years old. While this punitive measure was used widely in the 1970s and 1980s against university students and activists, its current reincarnation is more sinister in that the parents of the youngsters, some as young as ten years of age, are expected to be enforcers of home detention orders pending the sentencing of their children. Home arrests can run for months on end, with parents all the while under the threat of stiff fines and/or arrest if their children violate the orders. This practice has damaging consequences for Jerusalemites, particularly in the Old City, where families live in cramped living conditions.

Finally, we highlight the decades-old Israeli effort to evict Palestinians from the Masafir Yatta region in the southern hills of al-Khalil from their historic abodes. In May 2022, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that no legal barriers remained for the planned expulsion of Palestinian residents from the area to clear the way for a military firing zone. Since then, several homes in the area have been demolished, further demolition orders have been issued, and increased movement restrictions have been imposed as military exercises using live ammunition have commenced. We can only imagine the terror rained upon children with such indiscriminate use of firepower.

These recent developments are all elements of a longstanding multipronged strategy pursued by the Israeli state to cement its control over the land and stifle

resistance in its many forms and manifestations. Yet, Palestinians continue to resist settler colonial violence, in spite of the draconian measures that have been deployed against them for decades.

One of the themes implicit in this issue of *JQ* is the potentially subversive and liberatory role new knowledge about archaeology in Palestine can play in resisting the Zionist narrative that has underpinned and justified the colonization of Palestine. Palestinian scholars and institutions have a crucial role in this regard, whether in promoting the teaching of a politically aware and critical archaeology curriculum in universities, investment in archaeological investigations and research, fighting continuing restrictions on excavations on Palestinian lands, or using archaeological knowledge to launch legal challenges, whether in Israeli or international courts. Together with international scholars such as those whose works appear in this issue, they can contribute to a formidable movement for resisting violence and erasure.