



Ghosts of Jerusalem: Ramallah's Haunted Landscapes

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A view of recently constructed apartment buildings in Um al-Sharayet from the main Ramallah–Jerusalem road. *Source: Photo by Christopher Harker.*

In October 2012, a new roundabout was built at a point where it is possible to say, very approximately, that the Bireh neighborhood of Um al-Sharayet, the Ramallah neighborhood of Masyoun, and the UNRWA administered al-Am'ari refugee camp all meet. If a driver who has reached this point of convergence turns off the roundabout on to al-‘Awda Street, he or she will slowly descend the hillside to the valley floor. This street, parallel to the main Jerusalem–Ramallah road on the other side of the mountain, stretches along the valley through the neighborhood of Um al-Sharayet. Having passed the twenty-four-hour Salaayme Bakery and Supermarket, a useful local landmark for *service* drivers and passengers in an area without many distinguishing features, the road continues but starts to noticeably deteriorate in quality. Eventually, drivers must turn left uphill and join the main Jerusalem–Ramallah road in the neighborhood of Kufr ‘Aqab.

Anyone making this short trip will have travelled from the Ramallah conurbation in the Occupied West Bank to Occupied East Jerusalem. It is a journey that is at once both utterly banal and freighted with geographical complexity. Unbeknownst to the casual traveller, although certainly not to the current and former residents of Um al-Sharayet, cars and their passengers cross a border that, although invisible to the naked eye, has played an increasingly important role in shaping life on the edge of Jerusalem.

As many readers of this journal will already know, the municipal borders of Jerusalem were radically and unilaterally changed by the Israeli occupation in 1967. Israel seized 71,000 dunums from the surrounding twenty-eight Palestinian villages. As a result the territory of Jerusalem expanded from 38 km² to 108 km² (East Jerusalem expanded from 6.5 km² to 71 km²).¹ Despite UN Resolution 267, which ruled changes to the city's status were in violation of international law, in 1980 Israel enshrined its new "unified Jerusalem" in Israeli law.² The city's geography was significantly transformed once again in 2002, when the construction of the separation wall placed 55,000 Palestinian residents of Jerusalem behind this barrier, separating them from the city center.³ Since 1967, almost thirty-five percent of Palestinian land in East Jerusalem has been expropriated, primarily for Jewish colonies.⁴ Consequently, the border between the municipality of al-Bireh and Jerusalem was remade in a manner that reflected the broader power asymmetries between colonizer and colonized. In other words, over time Israeli actors have largely determined the physical – *and* the legal and political – boundaries of the ever-expanding city and state. Palestinians have certainly played a role in resisting such decisions, primarily through the obduracy of their own "facts on the ground." (A representative of al-Bireh municipality has said that zoning since the 1970s had been designed to locate buildings at the edges of the territories governed by the municipality, in order to prevent future encroachment.) However, Palestinian agency in such matters has been dwarfed by the military and bureaucratic apparatus of the occupation.

While a great deal has been written about the effects of these shifting geographies on Jerusalemites, not least the tens of thousands who have been almost forcibly warehoused in neighborhoods like Kufr 'Aqab,⁵ such changes also extend to the Ramallah conurbation in general, and the neighborhood of Um al-Sharayet in particular. The name Um al-Sharayet translates into English as mother of rags (or dish cloths). Depending on who you talk to, the name is said to derive either from the presence of a spring, where people washed their clothes, or from the piles of rags that people discarded in the area. It was a mountain on the edge of al-Bireh until the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the neighborhood's first residents – a mixture of Jerusalemites who were prevented from building within Jerusalem and refugees – began to buy land and build there. Many of the long-term residents still living in Um al-Sharayet are refugees, mainly from the nearby al-Am'ari Camp, but also from Qalandiya, Qaddura and Deir 'Ammar camps.

As a result of the Oslo Accords, the centralization of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, and then the closure regime enacted during the second intifada, the neighborhood expanded rapidly. After the second intifada started, migrants from the north and south of the West Bank who worked in Ramallah sought cheap accommodation relatively close to the city center. The neighborhood is currently dominated by the large

number of apartment buildings,⁶ most of which are six stories, and often built so close together that some residents compare the neighborhood to a refugee camp. Um al-Sharayet is also known for its wedding halls, which attract large numbers of revellers in the summer months, who often end up blocking some of the main streets with their bodies and cars and filling the entire neighborhood with loud music. As Lisa Taraki notes, the area also houses a number of Palestinian Authority ministries and other commercial buildings.⁷

While Ramallah's new (i.e., post-2000) migrants undoubtedly form the majority of residents in Um al-Sharayet, their presence there has also been enabled by another migration of Palestinians, one that has been far less remarked upon. This is the migration of Jerusalemites out of Um al-Sharayet and into the adjacent neighborhoods of Kufr 'Aqab and Semiramis. In many cases, it is the apartments of former Jerusalemites in Um al-Sharayet that have become available to migrants from the north and south to buy or rent. Such relocations have been made necessary by the Israeli occupation's "center of life" policy, which dictates that Palestinian residents of Jerusalem must be able to prove that they live within municipal boundaries. This in turn enables Palestinian Jerusalemites to maintain their residence in the eyes of the Israeli state (which in turn allows access to the city's historic core and beyond). The penalties for failing to prove that Jerusalem is one's center of life are severe. Between 1967 and 2009, some 13,000 Palestinian Jerusalem residence permits were revoked by Israel's Ministry of the Interior, half of them between 2006 and 2009,⁸ after a 1995 legal case led to a massive increase in deportations.⁹ Residence is established by payment of the *arnona*, or municipal tax, which as Dajani et al. point out,¹⁰ is akin to a form of extortion for many Jerusalemites, since the Jerusalem municipality does not and will not provide services to the Palestinian neighborhoods of Jerusalem that have been cut off from the city center by the separation wall. These 70,000 Palestinian residents have also recently been threatened with expulsion.¹¹

The consequences of these changes for Um al-Sharayet is that it has become a neighborhood where Jerusalemite residents *used* to live. Take for example Dina and her family, one of six or seven families who used to live in one apartment building but have now moved to Jerusalem. Dina grew up on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and married her husband, Ahmad, from Hebron, in 2001. Since both of them worked in Ramallah and Ahmad was prevented from crossing the Qalandiya checkpoint into Jerusalem, they moved to Um al-Sharayet in 2001, renting an apartment there. During the Israeli invasion of Ramallah in 2002, all twelve families living in their apartment building moved into Dina and Ahmad's ground floor flat for three days, for mutual provision and security. However, despite the strong social relationships that formed, in 2003 Dina and Ahmad moved to Kufr 'Aqab to maintain Dina's Jerusalem residency and acquire the residency for her children. Her eldest son was one year old at the time. Dina and Ahmad remain in Kufr 'Aqab, pay the *arnona* to the Jerusalem municipality, and send their children to school "in" Jerusalem. Dina and her children are able to visit her family, who still live on the Mount of Olives. Ahmad is unable to go, except in exceptional circumstances such as the opening of the checkpoints during Ramadan 2013. Although he applied for a family reunification visa from the Israeli Ministry of Interior Affairs, his application was rejected because he is a former political prisoner. Dina and Ahmad continue to work in Ramallah

and visit their friends in Um al-Sharayet. The whole family is able to visit Ahmad's family in Hebron, although because of the expense they only do so during holidays. However, they can live neither in Jerusalem nor in Hebron if they wish to maintain their Jerusalem identity documents *and* live together as a family.

Their story fleshes out the multiple geographies alluded to in the car ride at the beginning of this essay. Although physically contiguous with Kufr 'Aqab and Semiramis, Um al-Sharayet has become legal and administratively separated from Jerusalem and its neighborhoods. Legally, Palestinians are not only in a separate city, but almost in a separate country (or non-state). Residents such as Dina and her family have by necessity become acutely aware of the invisible, yet nevertheless incredibly powerful, border, and which side of this border they must live on. And yet Dina and Ahmad's almost daily presence in Ramallah discloses something more than just simply separation and annexation. For alongside this binary geography of inclusion-exclusion, there is also what can only be described as the haunted landscapes of Ramallah. This is a geography of ghosts, beings who are partly there, partly not. Both present (in some ways) and absent (in others) at one and the same time. Admittedly, such ghosts are, unconventionally, not at all scary. In fact, they are often beloved, and their full presence missed by current residents. For instance, we learnt about Dina and Ahmad during our research in their former apartment building through the fond recollections current residents had of them. And during the occasional social visits they made to the building, we were often told nostalgic accounts about the strong social bonds that existed there during the 2002 invasion. Furthermore, the ability to be both present and absent, not fully there, but certainly not invisible, offers certain advantages.

Let us take another "ghost," Tarek, who grew up in Nablus and then went to university abroad where he met his wife, Selma, a '48 Palestinian – to use the Palestinian expression for those who remained inside the borders of the new state of Israel in 1948. After some time abroad, the couple moved to Ramallah where Tarek works. Selma works in Jerusalem. Since Selma is an Israeli citizen, her children are entitled to insurance ("social security") from Israel. However, since they lived in Um al-Sharayet, Selma was declared a non-resident by the state of Israel, and refused the insurance. After considering a range of other strategies, Tarek and Selma moved to Kufr 'Aqab, where they can continue to live, to all intents and purposes, in and between both Ramallah and Jerusalem, while also claiming social insurance for their child. In other words, by moving to the other side of the Ramallah–Jerusalem jurisdictional border, they are able main their connections to both cities.

It is important to remember that while the Israeli occupation has carved the topographic spaces of Palestinian life in the occupied territories into increasingly smaller pieces, there are also a series of topological geographies that construct Palestinian everyday life too. If topography refers to a geometric conception of space, which is to say a physical area, then

[T]opology focuses on the qualitative properties of space (as opposed to the geometric). Topologically speaking, a space is not defined by the distances between points that characterize it when it is in a fixed state but

rather by the characteristics that it maintains in the process of distortion and transformation (bending, stretching, and squeezing but not breaking). Topology deals with surfaces and their properties, their boundedness, orientability, decomposition, and connectivity – that is, sets of properties that retain their relationships under processes of transformation.¹²

As Gregory points out, topologies can be terrifyingly dangerous, such as the ways in which the destruction of Palestine has been folded into the creation of the state of Israel.¹³ However, there are also the topologies of connection that enable Palestinians to subvert the dictates of the occupying power. For instance, in addition to Tarek and Selma’s enduring connections with Ramallah in general and Um al-Sharayet in particular (where Tarek’s brother continues to live), Selma’s multiple phone calls to her mother in the ’48 territories each day, exemplify how the power and endurance of family bonds across topographic boundaries (e.g., between the West Bank, Gaza, and the ’48 territories) maintain a set of networks that still – to a very minimal degree – encompass the entire territory of Mandatory Palestine.¹⁴ Of course, this subversion is no replacement for the end of the occupation and the reimplementation of full access to Jerusalem (and the ’48 territories) for all Palestinian citizens. However, just as within the borders of Jerusalem (as defined by Israel), where “two spatial systems are at work ... at one and the same time ... both separate and intertwined in ways that are widespread and complex,”¹⁵ we can see too that the borders between Ramallah and Jerusalem are complex and spatially multifaceted. And consequently we must think about Ramallah as more than just stones and houses. It is a city defined by its people, their practices, and the ghostly presence/absence of former residents, too.

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Endnotes

- 1 Ruba Saleh, “In the Seam Zone: Walaja’s Fate Between Jerusalem and Nowhere,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 49 (2012): 56. See also Yonatan Mendel, “New Jerusalem,” *New Left Review* 81 (2013): 34–56.
- 2 Mendel, “New Jerusalem,” 41.
- 3 Francesco Chiodelli, “The Next Jerusalem: Potential Futures of the Urban Fabric,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 53 (2013): 50–60.
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- 11 Judith Oppenheimer, "Barkat's Disengagement Plan," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 49 (2012): 79.
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- 14 Harker, "The Only Way Is Up?" 332.
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