

WEBSITE REVIEW

Jerusalem Story Squaring the Circle

Review by Roger Heacock

Abstract

This review of Jerusalem Story (www.jerusalemstory.com), a website created by Qatar's Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, doubles as a measured critique of philosophical, historical, and existential affects including fatalism, teleology, and pathos. The website project may have arisen out of the once and future unification of Palestinian resistance around Shaykh Jarrah in 2021, which encapsulated the overarching centrality of Jerusalem to Palestine's past, present, and future. Heacock notes that while the site has multiple entrance points and is brilliantly illustrated, the question remains whether the population studied is sufficiently inclusive. Certain issues are skirted, probably due to the multiplicity of themes it already evokes. The review compares Jerusalem Story to two notable existing websites, the Institute for Palestine Studies/Palestinian Museum's "Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question" – Palquest, and Palestine Remembered, and places it alongside other sources, written, oral, and pictorial. The reviewer sees in the website a tendency to evaluate essential milestones (Jordan's severance of ties in 1988, the Oslo accords, the apartheid wall) teleologically as cynical, failed, or sadistic decisions from the start. Such interpretations are treated as axioms, rather than hypotheses requiring sober analysis. Absent are Jerusalemites' issues involving each other in addition to their colonial oppressor. Despite the site's discursive tendency to treat their condition as one of sheer suffering bereft of that dynamic agency which has kept them firmly resilient and fiercely resistant, the review concludes that the site adds a great deal to our knowledge and empathy.

Keywords

Jerusalem; website; suffering; agency; teleology; pathos.

A prolonged visit to the new website, Jerusalem Story (www.jerusalemstory.com/en), launched in June 2022 by Qatar's Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Doha, is fully justified and handsomely rewarding. Launched in June 2022, it illustrates the lives of Jerusalem's Palestinian population. It adds to the package of offerings of the Doha Institute, which include its seven peer-reviewed journals, books, translations, conferences, and other initiatives. This is a different endeavor, intended to contribute to knowledge in general, but particularly to the understanding, and indeed the virtual experience, of the plight and steadfastness of Jerusalemites. It breathes both information and militancy – in fact, the two are comingled by definition. Not only does the political message come through loud and strong; it is also buttressed by information that is trustworthy and reliable, based on current knowledge, bereft of exaggeration or bravado, and with scrupulous respect for actual figures and estimates, without inflation or invention. What remains to be discussed is therefore the selection of events to be highlighted and promoted, which is true of any and every complex thesis.

Who are the indigenous Jerusalemites forming the focus here? Overwhelmingly Arab Palestinians, as illustrated by perusal of the various sections. The question arises: is this a comprehensive description of the human diversity of Jerusalem? One should not forget often discriminated minorities, for example the Africans (and their presence is noted), mainly in the Old City, and the Domari gypsies. Surely in future these populations will be dealt with in detail, as they deserve to be. And then comes the question of the Jews. At the turn of the twentieth century, we are told, around 1900, close to half of Jerusalem's population were Jews. Very few of them could be described as settlers (who, as invaders, are excluded from the scope of this site), even if many came from Europe to live near their holy sites for a time. Who were they? What happened to them? Are any of these still present today, or have they all been absorbed into or preempted by the "Yishuv" which is an abstraction referring to linguistic, cultural, and political Zionists, and not all pre-state Jews? Aviva Halamish, in "The Yishuv: The Jewish Community in Mandatory Palestine" (Jewish Virtual Library, September 2009), specifies that exceptions were the ultra-Orthodox and the communists, but there were in fact many other communities and individuals.

This original Jewish population, even if it no longer exists, merits attention, in order to clarify the historical and thus the present picture. After all, their intellectual descendants among Israelis and Jews more generally – believers, academics, journalists, and ordinary people – continue to fight the iron cage of Zionist ideology that has been inexorably descending upon them for more than one hundred years. Furthermore, the temptation to "other" people needs always to be resisted, as in the use of the term "other" in the graphic Snapshot of Jerusalem's Diverse History to denote people not belonging to mainstream versions of the three Abrahamic religions (even before these existed!). Others have names.

A few remarks, rather than an exhaustive description, are in order regarding the interlocking sections. The major rubric, entitled "Topics," actually deals principally with issues of closure, enclosure, waiting, checkpoints, and related matters which

make up the impossible daily existence of Jerusalem's Palestinians. Now these are indeed major concerns, but the fact, as anyone who has lived in the city knows, is that they are countered, often neutralized, by various strategies that in my opinion enhance rather than dampen the intensity of individual and collective life: discussions in the service taxi or bus; clever interactions with those who man the checkpoints; the enjoyment of time together, and the sense of the slow passage of life, resulting from long-practiced acquired patience: it is not easy for today's freewheeling Westerners to grasp the mechanism. Fatima Moghrabi, quoted in the "Voices of Jerusalem" feature story, is spot on when crowning her account of the trans-generational travails of her family as Jerusalemites, with the all-importance, at the end of the day, of "gathering with friends after 5:00 PM at Bab al-'Amud and drinking tea."

In practical terms, as compared with many other West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, Jerusalemites, at least those who have legal residence in the city, are free to travel around historic Palestine at will, to visit the world, and yet enjoy their unique micro-vantage point as residents of their city. Nothing is more lively than the streets of the Old City (at least until a few hours after sunset, and the precautions taken thereafter are not primarily due to the occupation, but to the real or imagined dangers of urban life all over the world). Indeed, we are reminded (in commentary on Matthew Teller's *Nine Quarters of Jerusalem*) that after all these years of brutal, state-sponsored settlement with its attendant expropriation and expulsions, the vast majority of the Old City (90 percent of its thirty-five thousand residents) are Palestinians, two-thirds of them young people. How they managed this feat of "remaining" (*baqa'*) needs to be an important subject of any study such as this one.

In most of the chapters, oppression burns through, and the pathos, and the victimization, in the beautiful Big Picture, for example. The overall impression left, as Dante found at the entrance to hell, is "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate" (abandon all hope you who enter here), perhaps an appropriate parallel since he had been exiled for life from Florence when he wrote *Inferno*. But once again, is life in its complexity not different? Let us take the Mubarak Awad story as an example: should one, in addition to his expulsion from Jerusalem and Palestine, not also speak more of what he did while there and indeed, when away? Before and early in the first intifada, he took part in public events, and added a particular face to the uprising, appealing to some and rejected by others. But he most certainly, through his speaking, writing, and actions, added "thickness" and a different perspective to the struggle. Non-violence (tax withholding, photography, cinema, financial support, hiding and caring for militants) and stones were closely related during that entire period, in Jerusalem and elsewhere. And, of course, he did indeed find himself deprived of residency rights to the city of his birth.

The biographies of this site are splendid (but where is Faisal al-Husseini?), heartfelt in many cases, the best part of the site in some ways, always intimate to the extent possible. And the biographies here include non-institutional, "young" Palestinians, who marked their times and the future, such as Maha Abu Dayyeh and Albert Aghazarian.

This brings up the vital question: can you separate Jerusalem from Palestine? The answer is no and so the issue lies in justifying this site. One can only imagine that, as with so many breakthroughs, the incentive for its creation has something to do with the insurrection spearheaded by Shaykh Jarrah's residents, bringing together all Palestinians in a concerted, decisive, and potentially definitive unified struggle carried out in the summer of 2021. In my mind, that example in itself justifies the project, especially if one adds the fact that, following the end of the second intifada, repeated individual and collective continuing acts of revolt occurred in Jerusalem, in 2015–16, for example. Jerusalem is Palestine, but in addition to its own characteristics, it possesses a microcosmic universal quality that unifies all of the disparate, endogenous, and exogenous regions of that insurgent nation, including the far-flung refugee camps and the distant diaspora.

The (not quite) exclusive focus on Jerusalem is thus fully justified. Does the site do it justice? The answer, in a time of political stagnation, is an emphatic yes, just through the sheer aesthetic brilliance of the presentations. The lessons of history are clear: the intermingling of political, practical, and aesthetic themes is ubiquitous and particularly important when politics alone provide little hope. Art, and culture more generally, cannot replace politics, but can fill in gaps and lend structure, perspective, strength, unity, and hope in difficult situations. The pictographic contributions are exquisite, their chromatic quality suitably romanticized (the reds are redder, the blues bluer, the perspective grander); graphs and maps are skillfully selected, faithfully and clearly reproduced. In this respect, one could not hope for more, and navigating the site is a gripping act. In fact, this aesthetic brilliance reinforces the dominant pathos of the overall thesis: Jerusalemites suffer (the second photograph in the Big Picture section is of a bearded man with helmeted soldiers bearing down on his neck – an all-suffering John the Baptist one might think, not a resistant Jerusalemite). And so, the very excellence of technique makes one wonder again whether content might not profit from some enrichment of a different, not necessarily heroic type, nor limited to exuberant special events such as festivals (although these are essential to the ensemble). In this respect, there is much to be learned from the theories and practice of oral history, about which more later.

Could one not, as it were, put more emphasis on factors internal to the Palestinian community, in the face of (not of course to be compared with) the constrictions of occupation, and in the quest for an even richer, multifaceted reality? One of many examples might be the problem of social relations within Palestinian society itself: are we to believe that it is a seamless, harmonious whole, plagued only from the outside? Of course not: Jerusalem is no different from the rest of the occupied territories in having its own class, cultural, and geographical contradictions, grafted onto those of the occupation. The issue is dealt with here and there (for example, in the backgrounder “al-Jidar [the Wall]: An Instrument of Fragmentation”) but it bears delving into further. Deciding on content certainly depends on the intended audience. Those already knowledgeable do not need further proof of the cruelty of settler colonialism. If, on the other hand, one wishes to convince, complexity still

remains preferable to single-minded denunciation, and better conveys the richness, intelligence, and determination of Jerusalemites.

And so, the question of the intended readership is essential. Have the editors carefully thought out the answer to this question? The very short entries intended to familiarize people with relevant terminology, as well as explanations such as the meaning of *maghrib* (“the place where the sun sets”) suggest that the principal audience is made up of people who know little about Palestine, language, place, and arising issues. Perhaps this is not true and, of course, a version of this site in Arabic would be precious, since the vast majority of Arabic speakers around the world are not allowed to come to Jerusalem, even for a brief visit. Indeed, for many concerned people, Jerusalem Story is an important stand-in for the city itself. Likewise, more clarity regarding intended readership is perhaps not a legitimate pursuit, as those who view, scan, peruse, read, or analyze the site can decide on their interest themselves.

Regarding the historical perspective, perhaps a bit of the ex post facto reasoning could be revised. Three examples stand out: King Husayn’s cutting of institutional ties, Oslo, and the apartheid wall. King Husayn’s *fakk al-irtibat* (severance of ties) speech on 31 July 1988 was at the time considered a great victory for the intifada, since Jordan finally acknowledged the independence of Palestine, and renounced the annexation carried out four decades earlier. Today, however, according to this site, one needs to view Husayn’s move as de facto connivance with Israel, leaving Palestinians to face the Zionist juggernaut alone, and in particular to fend for themselves regarding the future of Jerusalem, through the stripping of Palestinians and Jerusalemites in particular, of Jordanian passports, IDs, freedom to travel, and protections.

The second instance that might be rethought in a historically sensitive site such as this one is the account of Oslo. There is virtual unanimity today on its shortsightedness, or worse (Edward Said described it as “the Palestinian Versailles”) from the Palestinian point of view. But most people at the time of the signing welcomed it as a promise of freedom and independence, until underlying motivations were revealed and its actual unraveling occurred. The third example is the apartheid wall. Of course, Israel had long planned to isolate Palestinians as part of their counterrevolutionary, counterinsurgency, predatory strategy. But the decision to go ahead and build it in short order came as a result of the military activities of Palestinians (notably suicide bombings in the 1948 areas), so that the decision on the Israeli part was simultaneously strategic and tactical.

Does a website such as this one have a duty to see events as part of a historical flow or should they be concerned with present-day results? I would argue both are needed given that, if past is present, present is also past. Likewise a dose of internationalism is required, rejecting any form of narcissism. The “blogpost” account of the 2022 Jerusalem Arab Film Festival (JAFF) shows how such an approach can be exemplified. Festival director Nevin Shaheen observed that it “is important to know that we are not at the center when it comes to agony; we are not the only ones who are suffering . . . although we live in a tough city, we are not alone.”

Comparing the site with the joint Institute for Palestine Studies/Palestinian

Museum's "Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question" (www.palquest.org), there is clearly an overlap, yet there are significant differences: the latter is more systematic, encyclopedic, with scant concern for visual effects. It is more suited for certain types of historical and political research, on Palestine in general and even perhaps Jerusalem in particular, but less anthropological in its affect, less in tune with the Jerusalem lover's heart. The two are based on a number of common sources and share a general outlook, scarcely surprising since they also benefit from some authorial commonality. But this is in essence a good thing, promoting double checking and so on. Palquest seeks to cover everything, Jerusalem Story to plunge deeply into a single subject; Palquest to follow events, treaties, official life, Jerusalem Story to delve into subjective realities, measured in human, not institutional terms. There are of course other important source materials, and other websites such as the noteworthy Palestine Remembered (www.palestineremembered.com) created by Salah Mansour. Where Jerusalem is concerned, it presents every single neighborhood in the inner and outer ring, detailing them in time and space. More generally, and although all kinds of sources can be ferreted out through a careful reading of various contributions, there is a tendency for the *Jerusalem Story* to rely heavily on a few contemporary scholars. Some diversification would be in order.

Things, people, movements, and events left out will certainly be entered as time moves along: the Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas are one profoundly human element with a strong presence in Jerusalem (and not only in the Haram: they did well whenever elections permitted them to count their numbers). And sociability on the Haram itself deserves some attention: I fondly remember the days long ago when our little children played and frolicked there whenever we and they wanted to.

Other issues to be pursued should probably include oral history, which in Palestine and contrary to current beliefs was originally devoted to the great 1936 revolt, whose participants rather than those who experienced the Nakba, were being interviewed in the 1990s before it would be too late. This applies to Jerusalem as well as other areas, a tribute, in other words, to inventiveness, initiative, and resourcefulness rather than abject victimhood. This understanding (as well as a few works such as Rosemary Sayigh's) could help to reorient Palestinian oral history towards examining the dynamism which is also inherent in the Palestinian condition. This is not to exclude the role of suffering, and the first (and only) wave of Israeli "new history" came in the wake of claims long made by Palestinian survivors of the Nakba and long derided by Israeli historians.

Cartography is another promising approach, and which has been broached in the site. Pierre Jacotin, editor of the ur-maps of the Napoleonic *Description de l'Égypte*, named the sheets regarding Palestine "Filasteen or *ard al-quds*" (Palestine or land of Jerusalem). Khalil Tufakji's maps from the 1980s, hand-drawn in the Orient House, could be analyzed, as well as the relevant British survey maps, and those produced by Sami Hadawi for the United Nations. And then there is the matter of Israel's looting of Palestinian houses in Jerusalem, for which there are sources, for example, Zochrot's (www.zochrot.com) oral history and archival work focusing on Qatamun in particular.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (www.pcbs.gov.ps) needs to be consulted, and one cannot simply ignore al-Jazeera's notorious *Palestine Papers* (www.aljazeera.com/palestinepapers).

I have tried to show here how valuable this site is already, how promising, and yet, how one might disagree with its claim that Palestinians in Jerusalem are principally involved in how “to twist and distort their lives just to stay in their own city.” Most certainly this is part of the struggle, but far from all of it. The happiest people are not necessarily those who live problem-free, but rather, those who have historically mustered the resources to enjoy the plenitude of life despite all obstacles. Jerusalem “should” not, as claimed somewhere on the site, be a cherished world treasure – it *is* such a treasure, in all of its fullness, as those who love it never cease to tell us.

It is difficult to project an overall impression of such a multifaceted site, but the lesson seems to be to produce a balanced relationship between ongoing problems and ongoing solutions. Such an approach would give more credibility to the touching admonition, the haunting, passionate song by the Banat al-Quds choir, *La tahjuru* (Do not emigrate!), and their call for patience and steadfastness, which is most certainly an underlying theme of this website. Therefore, the overall evaluation has to be, echoing Voltaire's dictum, that if it didn't exist, Jerusalem Story would have to be invented.

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