

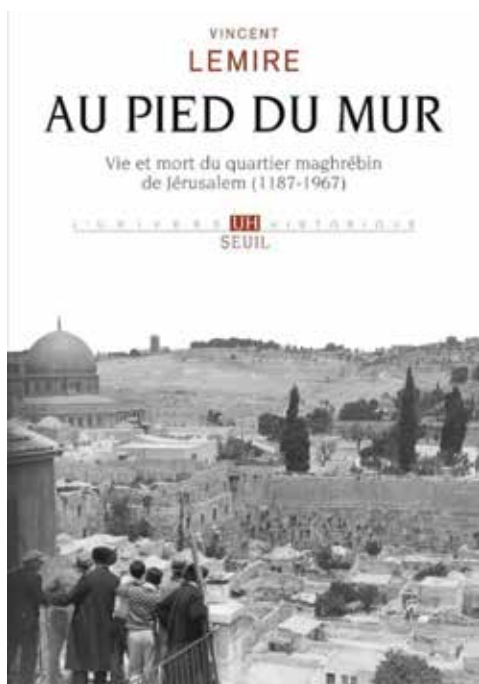
BOOK REVIEW

The History of the Mughrabi Quarter: Wiping Out Eight Centuries of Presence in Jerusalem

Review by Maissoun Sharkawi

Au pied du Mur: Vie et mort du quartier maghrébin de Jérusalem (1187–1967), by Vincent Lemire, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2022. 390 pages. \$54.24 paperback; \$19.99 ebook.

In the Shadow of the Wall: The Life and Death of Jerusalem's Maghrebi Quarter, 1187–1967, by Vincent Lemire, translated by Jane Kuntz. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. 400 pages. \$95.00 hardcover; \$32.00 paperback; \$26.63 ebook.



Abstract

In the Shadow of the Wall by Vincent Lemire explores the Mughrabi neighborhood's proximity to al-Buraq Wall¹ and its significance in the history of the city of Jerusalem. Through a meticulous examination of events such as the 1929 Buraq Wall Uprising and the Great Revolt that followed, Lemire highlights the resilience of the Mughrabi community against multiple colonial powers in order to protect their deep-rooted historical presence in Jerusalem. Drawing on a variety of historical sources and personal testimonies, the narrative not only provides a retrospective account, but also offers insights into the ongoing colonial project in Palestine. Lemire's analytical approach sheds light on the enduring challenges faced by Palestinians and other communities closely linked to the history of Palestine. These challenges include forced displacement and the destruction of key historical landmarks that act as links between communities and the land, all aimed at reshaping and reconstructing a new historical narrative. Ultimately, the book interweaves archival evidence with broader historical contexts, providing readers with a valuable perspective on the intricate tapestry of Jerusalem's history.

Keywords:

Jerusalem; Mughrabi neighborhood; al-Buraq; archives; multifaceted colonial powers; destruction of historical sites.

The original French title of this book, *Au pied du Mur*, directly translates

to “At the foot of the wall,” symbolizing its proximity to al-Buraq; in the city of Jerusalem, al-Buraq is the site of the western wall of al-Aqsa Mosque. The French title can also mean a situation of being trapped and helpless. In contrast, the new English title emphasizes being overshadowed by the presence of the wall. Both titles evoke the aura behind the intangible presence of the Mughrabi neighborhood in Jerusalem.

I am reviewing Lemire’s book while a turbulent period of profound genocidal warfare unfolds in Gaza, and in other regions of Palestine. This book transports readers to another time, when the stark realities of conflict first erupted in vivid details. It confronts readers with the atrocities and horrors that Palestine and Palestinians have endured in this contemporary era since the twentieth century, under both British colonial rule and the ongoing Israeli settler-colonial project. The Buraq Wall Uprising, which took place during the summer of 1929 under British rule, holds significant importance in this work. It signified the onset of widespread unrest that engulfed most major cities in Palestine, along with numerous Arab villages and Jewish colonies. To suppress the unrest, the British Army deployed air and armored weaponry and sought assistance from military units stationed at British bases outside Palestine.² The Buraq Uprising also sheds light on the importance of the Mughrabi quarter and the involvement of the Mughrabi community in the uprising, which ultimately paved the way for the Great Revolt from 1936 to 1939.

The Western Wall of the Haram al-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary, in the city of Jerusalem is evident as the center of this historical narrative. The site holds religious significance for Muslims and Jews alike and carries particular historical importance for Mughrabi Muslims (originating as migrant pilgrims from North Africa) who resided for centuries in the western courtyard of the Buraq Wall. French Islamic scholar Louis Massignon attributed special importance to this neighborhood. He proposed that the western wall symbolized the wall of the *westerners*, referring to the presence of the Mughrabi community of Jerusalem (19–20).³ Today, the city of Jerusalem remains a focal point of historical and religious significance, and currently endures intensive violence from Israeli state-backed Jewish colonization in the Old City and elsewhere.

In the Shadow of the Wall delineates the events that have shaped Jerusalem’s modern history, with particular attention on the Mughrabi quarter that once stood at the foot of the Buraq Wall. Lemire’s methodology for examining these historical events is both meticulous and engaging, providing an analysis of past events that offers a forward-looking perspective on the ongoing colonial project in Palestine. In addition, the book sheds light on possible future developments that Palestinians may face, including the threat of forced displacement and the continuing destruction of villages, towns, cities, and historical landmarks.

The book offers an exploration of the Mughrabi quarter from the early twelfth century to the late 1960s. It uncovers a detailed narrative of enduring conflict, showcasing the resilience of communities against successive imperial powers, from the Ottoman Empire to British colonialism, the Jordanian administration, and the current Israeli colonial rule. Lemire enriches the narrative of the Mughrabi quarter and the intricate history of Jerusalem and Palestine by drawing on a diverse range of

historical records from various primary sources. Each archival source is meticulously identified and analyzed, providing an understanding of past and present-day events. The archives include those of the Islamic Court of Jerusalem, the Awqaf in Abu Dis, the Jordanian-Jerusalem Municipality, the French archives in Ankara, the diplomatic archives in Nantes, the records of the Directorate for Algerian Affairs in the French National Overseas Archives, the Royal Archives in Rabat, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) archives. In addition, the archives of the League of Nations, UNRWA, and UNESCO contribute significantly to a broader contextual understanding of the subject. The author delves into personal archives of individuals involved in the events and a few testimonies of former residents of the Western Wall area offer valuable insights into the history of Jerusalem and its Mughrabi quarter. The involvement of the International Court of Justice in The Hague adds another layer to the narrative, particularly in light of current circumstances and Israel's dismissive approach to international law and UN resolutions.

Three fourths of the book are dedicated entirely to the Mughrabi quarter, providing a detailed account of the Mughrabi presence within the city's walls. In his insightful exploration of medieval Jerusalem's philanthropic landscape, the author highlights the central role of an Islamic charitable foundation (*waqf*) in promoting the welfare of the Mughrabi community: the establishment of the Waqf Abu Madyan, dating back to the early fourteenth century, initially seeded by a donation from the great Ayyubid ruler, Salah al-Din, in the late twelfth century. This foundation, along with the establishment of the Madrasa Afdaliyya by Salah al-Din's son Afdal, underlines the deep religious roots of the Mughrabi community (153–91). This institution appears to have played a pivotal role, beyond the provision of religious education, in shaping the cultural and intellectual landscape of the Mughrabi community within and beyond the city walls. An exploration of this waqf foundation's legacy, documented in manuscripts and historical records, could provide scholars with valuable insight into its influence on the Mughrabi community and its broader import within the historical narrative of Jerusalem and Palestine.

In a pivotal moment of history, Ibrahim Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt during the reformation era of the Ottoman Empire in 1840, breathed new life into the legacy of Salah al-Din's charitable foundation. With his confirmation of its legal validity, the enduring assets of this foundation gained newfound protection and recognition. At the same time, a tantalizing opportunity emerged for colonial France in relation to its recently conquered territories in Algeria, beckoning them to explore their role in the power dynamics of Jerusalem and the region. This opportune moment invites readers to delve into the complex transition period between Ottoman rule and the rise of European colonial influence in Palestine. The book devotes much attention to the influx of North African refugees into the Levant in the wake of France's conquest of Algeria in the 1830s, and later its colonization of Tunisia and Morocco. Lemire's lack of emphasis on the Algerian presence in other regions of Palestine may be due to his primary research focus being on Jerusalem as a "global city." However, readers may have found it compelling to explore the presence of other Mughrabi communities,

particularly in the northern Galilee, and their links with the Mughrabi community and the Waqf Abu Madyan in Jerusalem.

The period of British colonial rule over Palestine (1917–48) brought further political changes that affected the Mughrabi communities. Following World War I, and the defeat of the Ottomans, France and Britain vied for control over the Middle East, leaving local residents (the “orphans of the Ottoman Empire” as Lemire refers to them) subject to two competing colonial powers. During this period, Algerians, who held a different status to Moroccans and Tunisians under French colonial rule, sought to demonstrate their position as French subjects under the Palestine Mandate. This was done to protect their property and land from the pressures associated with the onset of the Zionist project, which aimed to expropriate their land and historical legacy in the city of Jerusalem. Following the end of British colonial rule, France eagerly sought to regain control over this miniature version of French Algeria in the Middle East, as expressed by Lemire. Furthermore, France engaged in negotiations with the Israeli authorities for the restitution of Mughrabi property, arguing its status as belonging to French citizens. Louis de Massignon frequently cited the rights of ownership of the Tlemcanian Waqf, aiming to imply its Algerian roots and thus justify France’s claim to protect this heritage.

During the Algerian War of Independence, the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) wielded influence even in distant Jerusalem, as evidenced by the assassination of Hajj Lounis, a waqf inspector from French Algeria. Lounis was targeted and killed in Setif in 1957 upon his return from Jerusalem, highlighting the reach of geopolitical tensions at the time. In the pan-Arab era and the struggle for independence, the Mughrabi quarter became a secret battleground, witnessing tensions between France and North African colonies, as well as between France and Jordan. (Currently, a new administrative body has emerged in Jerusalem with the principal goal of positioning Jordan as the “Holy Land” and initiating investments in religious tourism projects.) During this period, France made efforts to preserve the waqf lands and the Mughrabi quarter as a gesture to strengthen confidence between France and the North African presence, at least in Jerusalem.

Following the independence of Algeria, the file of Waqf Abu Madyan was transferred by France to Algerian authorities in 1962. Notably, in 1965, Mohammed Boukharouba, a prominent figure in Algerian politics, assumed the presidency and adopted the name *Houari Boumediene*, symbolizing Algeria’s enduring presence in the Middle East.

Lemire examines how, after the June 1967 war and the capture of Jerusalem, religious Zionists sought to translate their messianic aspirations into tangible political goals. It is important to understand the decision-making behind this process, especially as it relates to heritage and conservation. The operational Israeli cabinet held well-organized meetings that brought together the military authority, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the West Jerusalem Municipality, and the National Park Authority, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim was to provide advice on the appropriate decisions for the efficient destruction of the

Mughrabi quarter. This destruction was principally carried out on the night of 10 June 1967, immediately following the ceasefire that ended the war. Lemire's treatment of this traumatic moment unveils the perspectives of key Israeli figures, including Moshe Dayan and the "Old Lion," David Ben-Gurion (193–245). As a guide to Jerusalem's history and challenges, Lemire's insightful analysis and compelling narrative make this work essential for anyone seeking to understand the complex factors influencing Palestine's present and future. His poignant narrative serves as a crucial reminder of the imperative to bear witness to history's darkest moments. It is essential reading for anyone seeking to comprehend the complexities of modern warfare and the resilience of those who endure its trials. However, further exploration into the testimonies of individuals who inherited the memories of this place from their ancestors, as well as those who returned to their second home countries while carrying the legacy of this site, would have added valuable depth to the narrative. Such perspectives could have enriched our understanding of the lasting impact of historical trauma and the ways in which individuals continue to carry these legacies forward.

Maissoun Sharkawi is an associate professor in the Faculty of Applied Arts at the Palestinian Technical University–Kadoori in Ramallah. She is a research associate for the French Institute of the Near East (IFPO) and is currently researching Algerian exile and migration to northern Palestine between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Endnotes

- 1 In Islam, al-Buraq Wall is believed to be where the Prophet Muhammad tied his winged horse, al-Buraq, when he made his night journey to Jerusalem.
- 2 Maher Charif, "Ninety Years after the Buraq

Uprising," Institute for Palestine Studies blog, 6 September 2019, online at www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/236017.

- 3 Page numbers in this review refer to the original French publication.