

The Orient House and its Ordeals

On July 15 of this year the Israeli minister of security announced the closure of the Orient House for another six months, effecting an extension of the original closure, first made in August 2001 in the post-Oslo era. The Israeli orders of exactly twenty years ago included the shutting and sequestration of some forty-two Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem, and the dismissal of their staff in many cases. The objective was, and is, to curtail and control all Palestinian institutional presence in East Jerusalem. (This includes the closure of the Institute for Palestine Studies offices and the relocation of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* in 2001 from Shaykh Jarrah to the West Bank). This year the closure of the Orient House took place in the context of heightened clashes over al-Haram area, and particularly of settler activities in Shaykh Jarrah and Silwan.

But what is the significance of the Orient House, and why has it been targeted for the last twenty years by successive Israeli governments (Likud, Labor, and now the right-wing alliance Yemina)? Following the Madrid peace conference in 1991, Faisal Husseini, at the time head of the Jerusalem portfolio in the PLO, established his headquarters in the Husayni family's Shaykh Jarrah mansion, built by Isma'il Musa al-Husayni in 1897. Since 1983, it had also housed the Arab Studies Society, chaired by Faisal Husseini. It was this link that led the Israelis to first close the Orient House after the Algiers Declaration of Independence in 1988 when they considered the Orient House and the studies center as a front for PLO activities. Well before the Oslo Accords



The Orient House, 2021. Photo by Siba Khoury.

were signed, the Orient House hosted the Technical Committees whose purpose was to prepare the grounds for planning the prospective institutions of a future Palestinian state. They included many activists and professionals in the fields of planning, administration, cartography, hydrology, economics, demography, and systems analyses. The teams worked for months, more or less openly, in preparing different scenarios for the post-Madrid peace prospects. It can be said, without exaggeration, that the contingencies of Palestinian statehood were born in the Orient House.

Before that, the Orient House had had a rich history of association with the cause of Palestine and Jerusalem. It gained notoriety when in 1898 it hosted the visit of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his wife Augusta Victoria. During the visit a tragedy occurred when the Husayni family was preparing for the Kaiser's arrival. "Ruwaida, daughter of the Ottoman Minister of Education in Jerusalem, had been chosen to present the queen with a gift. While she helped the servants light the rooftop lanterns, the child's gauzy white dress caught on fire and she burned to death," according to a contemporary narrative. "The official visit went on as planned, under the shadow of the horrific incident."¹

During 1936, Haile Selassie was its resident when he sought refuge from Italian occupation of Ethiopia before moving to Villa Leah. He spent his Jerusalem exile there and in a number of other places, including the King David Hotel. Immediately after the war it housed the newly established United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) during its first two years. After this, the Orient

House was turned into a hotel, and housed international NGOs, before becoming a hub for nationalist activities, beginning with the Arab Studies Society, and later, after the Madrid peace conference, with the Technical Committees. When the peace accord between the PLO and the Israeli government was signed, it was assumed, naively as we now know, that the objections against prospective Palestinian statehood had become part of the past.

A major concern among the Palestinians who signed the Oslo Accords was the future status of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian institutions that had evolved over the years under Israeli rule. A pledge was made by the Israeli government in October 1993, under pressure from the European governments who were keen for the success of the accords, to guarantee the right of Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem to function freely. In the famous statement signed by then foreign minister Shimon Peres, “All the Palestinian institutions of east Jerusalem, including the economic, social, educational, and cultural, and the holy Christian and Muslim places, are performing an essential task for the Palestinian population Needless to say, we will not hamper their activity; on the contrary, the fulfillment of this important mission is to be encouraged.” Despite those guarantees Israel began to harass and, sometimes expel, the staff of the bulk of Palestinian institutions, including trade unions, cultural foundations, theatre groups, and even musical and concert halls such as Yabous and Hakawati theatre. The Orient House, which by then had housed the Arab Studies Society, was on top of the list for closure since Israel saw it as a logistic base for the future planning of Palestinian statehood.

It is a sad indication that while earlier closure orders were met with serious opposition, local and international, including protests by the Quartet and a large number of diplomatic missions in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the current extension of the closure has been barely noticed. Almost nothing in the international and Arab press and media. Of the local press, only *al-Ayyam* published a short item on page 15 (*al-Ayyam*, 16 July 2021). The tribulations of the Orient House, and the fate of its confiscated archives dating back to the days of Faisal Hussein, has been subsumed by what seems more pressing issues of settlement encirclement, land confiscation, intrusions into al-Haram, and most recently the attacks on Silwan and Shaykh Jarrah. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the frozen status of the Orient House reflects the sum total of these issues of creeping annexation of Jerusalem. After all, the Orient House exists in the heart of Shaykh Jarrah. It is still continuously harassed by the visible presence of the border police, indicating that East Jerusalem is just as thoroughly occupied, if not more lethally, as Hebron and Nablus.

The current issue of *JQ* brings to you a new batch of articles, essays, and a larger selection than usual of reviews of books and exhibits.

“What’s in a name?” Shakespeare asks in *Romeo and Juliet*. In the Old City of Jerusalem, the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, names reveal Israeli mechanisms of national validation and erasure. As the sovereign power with the ability to assign names, Israel seeks to sever the link between freedom of worship – granted to Jews, and then to Muslims and Christians – with the freedom to see the city as a symbol

of national and political yearning. In “The Language of Jewish Nationalism: Street Signs and Linguistic Landscape in the Old City of Jerusalem,” Amer Dahamshe and Yonatan Mendel examine the power relations and politics of space in the Old City of Jerusalem through street signs, toponymy, and the linguistic landscape.

In “Christian Arab Pilgrimages to Palestine and Mount Sinai” Nabil Matar examines three nineteenth-century accounts written by Orthodox and Catholic pilgrims to St. Catherine’s monastery in Sinai and to Jerusalem and other parts of Palestine. His research shows the popularity of pilgrimages among Christian Arabs and their sense of place in the Ottoman world.

Toine van Teefelen’s “Rachel’s Tomb: Narrative Counterspaces in a Military Geography of Oppression” is a study in counter-narratives of oppression. He writes:

Rachel’s Tomb area and nearby checkpoint 300 in the north of Bethlehem have become an arena of cultural opposition to an Israeli geography of oppression that excludes, fragments, shrinks, and closes off Palestinian space. I will describe how a spatial-narrative politics – articulating counter-narratives through the strategic use of space – has helped to rewrite the Israeli military geography of power and control. Over the last fifteen years, both locals and foreigners in the area have inscribed narrative discourses of home, freedom, and welcoming into this geography in rhetorical contrast to the discourse of military power. I will illustrate oppositional politics by brief analyses of statements of daily life *sumud* or steadfastness; examples of Palestinian Christian religious practices; the Palestine marathon in Bethlehem; and the iconic graffiti of British artist Banksy.

Ahmad Heneiti, in “Jerusalem’s Villages: Grey Development and Annexation Plans,” examines the impact of Israeli planning schemes for greater Jerusalem as envisioned in the Greater Jerusalem 2020 plan, and how they will impact the incorporation of the Palestinian suburban locations such as Abu Dis, Sawahara, al-‘Ayzariya, Anata, and others. Heneiti’s main conclusion is that the Israeli plan will help push a substantial body of Palestinian residents into the suburban periphery of Jerusalem – a large part of them outside the boundaries of the Israeli municipal areas and into area C of the West Bank. This will accomplish two major objectives for Israeli strategy: a demographic one (fewer Arabs); and an urban-strategic one: integrating the outlying settlements such as Maale Adumim into the body of the municipality.

The life and times of the maverick Jacob de Haan is examined in this issue by Nathan Witt. De Haan, born in Amsterdam in 1880, was trained as a lawyer but became known as a poet, a journalist, and a writer of erotic queer fiction and poems during the 1920s in Palestine. De Haan is widely regarded as the “Dutch Oscar Wilde.” In 1924, he was shot and killed outside Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem. The assassination took place two weeks before he was scheduled to travel to London in an attempt to repeal the Balfour Declaration.

Nazmi Jubeh’s “Suq Tariq Bab al-Silsila” is the second essay in our series on

Jerusalem neighborhoods. The historic market adjoining al-Haram area had various functions during Mamluk and Ottoman eras and was transformed several times in the twentieth century, as handicrafts shops started to disappear gradually, to be replaced by produce and grocery shops, restaurants, and cafés. More transformations occurred after 1967, and the market became more open to tourism and visitors to al-Buraq Wall and al-Aqsa Mosque with souvenir shops. Tourism dominated the suq, but restaurants, cafés, groceries, and butcher shops did not disappear until the second intifada when more dramatic transformations occurred as the touristic activity was halted and most shops closed. Tariq Bab al-Silsila is targeted these days by settlers and constantly threatened with confiscation given its location on the northern boundaries of the extended Jewish Quarter next to Sahat al-Buraq. Still, the resistance of its determined residents and proprietors has formed an impenetrable wall that has prevented all attempts to take over this central area.

Laila Parson's essay-review "Island Exile: Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi in the Seychelles" examines al-Khalidi's diaries in exile – written in English – edited by his grandson Rafiq Hussein and published in 2020 titled *Exiled from Jerusalem*. This book complements al-Khalidi's three-volume Arabic memoirs *Mada 'ahd al-mujamalat* written in the years immediately following the Nakba, which constitute a comprehensive and compelling account of al-Khalidi's public life. The Arabic memoirs are certainly a key source for understanding the major events of the Mandate era and the Nakba itself. But the Seychelles diaries convey an intimacy not present in the Arabic memoirs. We learn about the rhythms of his relationships with his fellow prisoners, his longing for his wife and children, his reading habits, and his fears. The diaries also provide a glimpse down into the murky depths of his feelings about the British and about his colleagues in Palestinian politics, including figures such as Haj Amin al-Husayni and Ragheb Nashashibi.

In "Is the Palestine Virus Incurable?" Penny Johnson reviews *I Found Myself in Palestine: Stories of Love and Renewal from Around the Globe*, edited by Nora Lester Murad. In this collection, Johnson finds it "intriguing that the particular experiences of spouses, teachers, activists, etc. have a tendency to morph into an unquestioning general acceptance of categorization, both of others and the self, as *ajaneb* (foreigners), even for those who have lived in Palestine for decades and raised Palestinian children."

Sa'ed Atshan and Katharina Galor's "Jerusalem, Museums, and Discourses on Settler Colonialism" compares four Jerusalem-themed exhibits in different geographical and political contexts: the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem, the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Jewish Museum Berlin. It examines the role of heritage narrative, focusing specifically on the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is either openly engaged or, alternatively, avoided. The writers specifically highlight the asymmetric power dynamics as a result of Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, and how this political reality is addressed or avoided in the respective exhibits. They also explore the agency of curators in shaping knowledge and perspective and study the role of the visitor community. The essay maintains that the differences in approaches to

exhibiting the city's cultural heritage reveal how museums are central sites for the politics of the human gaze, where significant decisions are made regarding inclusion and exclusion of conflict.

In reviewing the presentations at the first Palestine Writes Literature Festival, Amanda Batarseh suggests that Arabic literary heritage as a tradition is already underrepresented as a third world literature. "The broadening of the Palestinian canon to include non-Arabic writing by exilic authors" (often writing in English) and emerging popular genres ranging from speculative fiction to the graphic novel "resonates with the festival's articulation of Palestine in the language of transnational struggle." This inclusivity, however, also raises entrenched anxieties about the particularities of Arabic literary heritage. Most threateningly, Batarseh argues, is "the potential normalization and compression of Palestinian identity into a narrative of diasporic 'statelessness'" that such an overshadowing may reproduce.

Endnotes

- 1 Rachel Neiman, "7 Spooky Sites in Jerusalem," *Israe21c*, 30 October 2019, online at www.israel21c.org/7-spooky-sites-in-jerusalem/ (accessed 14 August 2021).

Corrigendum:

In *JQ* 86 (Summer 2021), on pages 60 and 61, the two authors' names of the captions for stereoscope 57 were mistakenly interchanged. The online version is now corrected.