

LETTERS FROM
JERUSALEM: ON GAZA

You Cannot Erase Gaza!

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Abstract

This narrative captures the unique passion for Gaza's history and the remarkable character of a man named Salim al-Rayyes, who lovingly tends an antique store in the heart of Gaza City. Salim's collection, largely acquired from local Gaza Palestinians, spans the late Ottoman and British Mandate eras, Egyptian administration, and Israeli occupation, and includes even rare Judaica items acquired through connections with Israeli antique sellers. The narrative takes an emotional turn as the author recounts the events of the current Israeli attack on Gaza and the uncertainty surrounding the safety of Salim and his family. The story of Salim al-Rayyes provides a glimpse into the relentless determination to safeguard the history and heritage of a place that has witnessed countless hardships and remains a symbol of resilience.

Keywords

Gaza; Palestine; Israel; war; collective memory; Nakba; refugees; storytelling; erasure; ethnic cleansing.

At the end of May 2023, I was at Salim al-Rayyes's house in the Tal al-Hawa neighborhood of Gaza City. We were having dinner with his family, which was a frequent occurrence for me during my work trips to Gaza. As we were talking, I noticed a piece of artwork on the wall that I had never noticed before. I asked Salim what it was, and he replied, "It is a family tree of the al-Rayyes family, dating back to the mid-eighteenth century. We have been here for many centuries before

that, but this is as far back as I can properly document.” I inspected the huge poster for fifteen minutes, enthralled with the details and design. “There are stories passed down through generations about the al-Rayyes family in Gaza. We have been involved in every major event in Gaza since the dawn of time. We are Gaza through and through. We have been here through every destruction and every rebuilding, and we always will be,” Salim said with a righteous sense of pride.

I first met Salim in October 2021 during a work trip. I was going to stay in Gaza longer than usual, for nine days, and had some free time to explore. I spent hours trying to find interesting or historical places to visit, and I came across an article that mentioned a distinctive antique store in the heart of Gaza’s Old City. After my last meeting on a humid October afternoon, I followed the instructions on how to get there. I turned left at the historic al-‘Umari Mosque, walked approximately fifty meters, and turned right. There, I saw a nondescript storefront with a chaotic display of random goods. I approached the man and noticed that he was sitting alone, drinking tea. I asked him in Arabic, “Are you Salim?” He responded loudly in English, “Of course I am Salim, who else would I be? Come in and take a seat. Where are you from?” I told him I was from Boston, and he jumped out of his seat and said, “I lived in Boston for seven or eight years in the 1980s. I went to university there and lived in Cambridge, near Harvard!” It is not often that you meet someone in Palestine who has been to Boston, let alone someone in Gaza, who has lived there for such a long period.

I scanned the small store, which is approximately three meters wide and nine meters deep. It is filled with shelves of assorted books, trinkets from various parts of the world, a large poster of Gamal Abdul Nasser, and two-meter-high cabinets. He asked me how I found his store and if there was anything in particular that I was looking for, to which I responded, “Well, what do you have?” He laughed and said, “I have anything you’re looking for, don’t worry.” Again, I scanned the shelves of books, which included numerous Hebrew–English dictionaries, silver Sphinx trinkets from Egypt, and various items of jewelry, and thought to myself, “I’m skeptical.”

I asked him what kind of goods he had from Palestine, particularly historical ones. Having visited various “antique and historical stores” in Jerusalem, I must admit that my expectations were quite low. He retorted, “Hahaha, sure, what time period or subject?” I replied, “Let’s start with the British Mandate.” Salim went to the back of the store, opened one of the cabinets full of binders, and said, “Let’s start here.” I opened the binder and found it filled with individual historical documents, neatly stored in plastic sleeves, most of which were in great condition. I start leafing through, seeing British government documents, handwritten letters by Palestinians, and even documents from Zionist leaders. I naively asked Salim, “Are these legitimate?” He answered back, “Hahaha, of course, everything is an original copy. I have maps, documents, photos, letters, land contracts, and identity cards ... anything you want.”

I asked Salim if I could see some of the identity cards. He walked back to the cabinet, grabbed two binders, and put them in my lap. Then, he quickly ran out of the store to buy coffee. Identity cards from the Mandate period, the Egyptian occupation, and the Israeli occupation were all right there in front of me. Dozens of each. I grabbed

one of the Mandate identity cards and read that the man was from Gaza. When I asked Salim if he knew anything about him, he went on for five minutes talking about a man named Hasan. He described Hasan's family background, occupation, place of residence, essentially providing a detailed account similar to a Wikipedia article about this individual from Gaza. I wondered how Salim knew so much about this random person and asked him if Hasan was related to him in any way. Again, he laughed and said, "No, I just know the story behind every piece in my store." I asked him for any identification pieces he had for Hasan, and I ended up buying his IDs from the Mandate period (figure 1), Egyptian period, and Israeli occupation period.

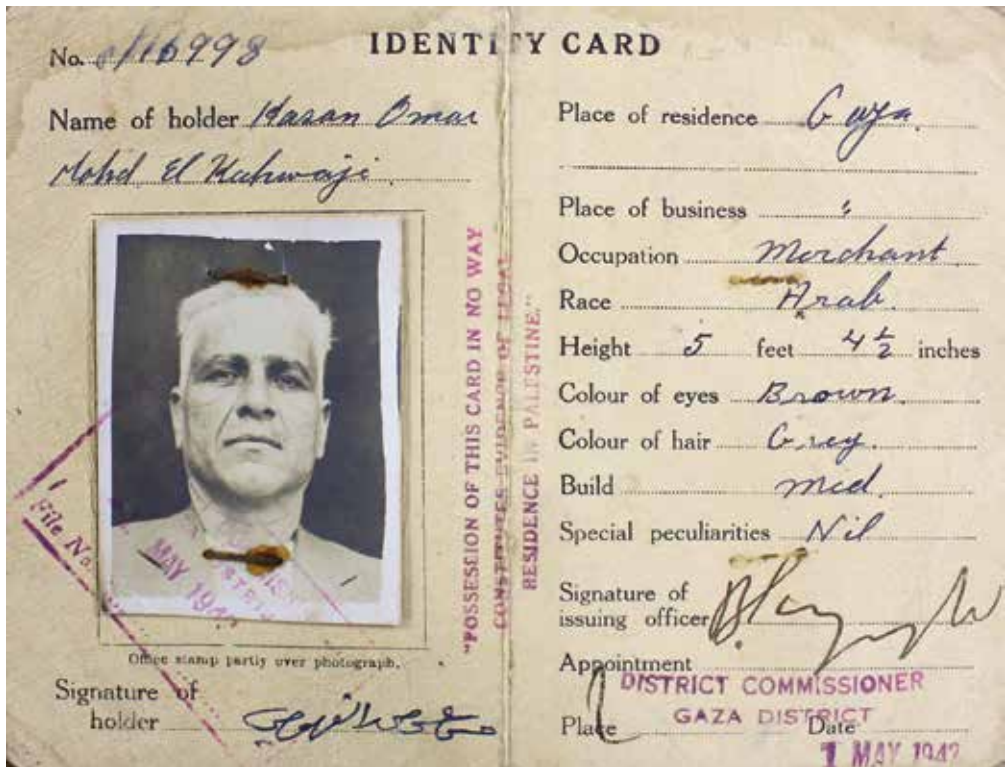


Figure 1. British Mandate identity card for Hasan Kahwaji, issued in 1942. It was the first purchase the author made from Salim. Photo by author.

Salim, in what I later discovered was his usual manner, asked me, "Are you interested in a phone book?" I smirked and replied, "I'm not sure, maybe?" He reached up to a shelf and retrieved a book titled *Palestine Phone Book, 1929* published by the British in Arabic. I started scrolling through it. At that time, Gaza only had four telephones, and the numbers were only four digits. Again, the piece was in very good condition, considering it was almost a century old. I decided to buy that as well. Salim said, "What about Ottoman documents? I have plenty of those, and they are ornate too!"

After spending three hours in his store, I purchased a dozen items, including a poster of King Farouk, a driver's license from the Egyptian occupation era belonging to Hasan, coins from the Mandate era and Ottoman era, a stamp book, and a family picture dating back to 1915 (figure 2). All items were priced extremely reasonably. Salim gave me his cell phone number and welcomed me back to the store whenever I was in Gaza.



Figure 2. A 1915 family photo from Salim's collection of Ibrahim Zharifi, who may have been a member of the Gaza City Council. Photo by author.

The second time I visited Salim was six weeks later, during another work trip. I asked him about the historical pictures he had. Salim, on cue, went to the back of the store and pulled out binders. He said, "Should we start with Mandate and late Ottoman?" to which I replied, "Of course." I began looking through the binders, and when I stopped on a page, Salim said to me:

Oh, I see you like this one. I love it too. The picture is from 1924 and features four friends. They grew up together but went their separate ways after graduating from school. They represent the changing times in Palestine at that time. As you can see, one person is wearing a tarbush with a Western-style suit and a tie, another is bareheaded but wearing a

Western suit without a tie, and the other two are dressed in variations of fellaheen attire. The early 1920s were a period of significant transition for us. There were new ideas and clothing styles, new opportunities for education, new leaders and regulations, and a growing colonial movement to address.

I removed the photo from its sleeve and set it aside. As I continued to scroll through the book, Salim gave me deep and intimate stories about every photo, highlighting what was interesting or special about each one.

After buying a few items, Salim invited me to have dinner at his family's house in Tal al-Hawa. He told me he would pick me up at 8 pm.

At 8 sharp, he was waiting outside my hotel in the heart of Gaza City with his son, Jameel, and we exchanged greetings. We drove for ten minutes to his family's house, and throughout the journey, he explained the various neighborhoods of Gaza, including their construction history, purpose, and resident demographics. As we entered his home, I noticed a familiar sight that I have seen a thousand times in Palestinian homes: a set of big, old keys hanging on a nail in the living room. I asked Salim which village his family was from in Palestine – in what is now Israel, after the initial period of extensive ethnic cleansing that lasted until the mid-1950s. A little surprised, Salim informed me that he is part of the 20 percent of Palestinians in Gaza who are locally referred to as *muwatanin*, nationals, that is, native residents, as opposed to the other 80 percent who are *laji'in*, refugees. He said the key belonged to his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, who owned vast properties in the ancient city of Gaza. He said that the building behind his current store was a grand residence and hotel, which was seized by Napoleon during his invasion of the Arab world in the late eighteenth century.

During dinner, I asked Salim why he had not considered opening a museum, an idea that he always finds amusing whenever I mention it.

I have no interest in being a curator. We don't get enough tourists here anyway, so it's not worth sitting around waiting for people to look at things and then leave. I enjoy the business aspect of it. You know that people who come to Gaza, at the very least, identify with our struggle. Therefore, you can be assured that your customers are good people with good intentions. Would I run the same type of store in Jerusalem? Probably not. But for Gaza, it works. I love witnessing the joy in someone's eyes when they have the opportunity to possess and appreciate a piece of our history. They will return to their countries and display fragments of Palestine to counter the delegitimization of our people. Also, in my experience, only the true enthusiasts purchase truly rare or unique pieces, so I trust them to make good use of them.

I asked him how many customers come per week or month, to which he replied, "Foreigners, probably two or three every two weeks. They usually buy coins or stamps, something more basic. Palestinians – at most half a dozen a day – generally come to get quotes on items they have, rather than to make purchases.

Before my next trip, I messaged Salim on WhatsApp to let him know I was coming. He responded by bombarding me with fifty images and the message, “Let me know if you are interested in anything or need an explanation.” As I scrolled through the items, I found some random stuff that didn’t interest me, but also some really good documents. One item I did not understand was what appeared to be a uniform, so I sent him a question mark emoji. About ten minutes later, I received a three-minute audio message and additional photos of the item from him. He informed me that it was an authentic Palestine Tax and Customs uniform, worn by a Palestinian employee in Gaza. He added photos of the tag to show that it was made in Palestine, as well as the department name. He also sent me numerous photos of the person who used to wear the uniform. This started a weekly or biweekly trend, where Salim would send me anywhere from five to fifty photos of random things he thought I would like, or that he had just discovered or bought from someone.

One time, while we were sitting around his shop, I asked him how much inventory he actually has, where he keeps it all, and if the store holds everything. In his typical manner, he chuckled and mentioned that the main section of the store displayed only approximately 40 to 50 percent of his actual inventory. He said that an additional 30 percent is in the attic of the store, and another 30 percent is either at his home or in storage. To the question of how he acquired so much, he explained,

It all began with inheriting my extended family’s belongings. When my grandfather and father passed away, no one else in the family showed much interest in them, but I felt a strong connection to these items. I wanted to preserve our family’s history, as we have been here for generations. Then I thought to myself, if my family has these sorts of materials, others must as well. So I reached out to friends to see if they had any items they were interested in selling. The newer generations do not seem to care about this sort of thing. I assume this is because of the blockade and the constant struggle to provide for their families. Family documents from one hundred years ago are not considered a priority. So I started by buying those.

As the blockade worsened over time, people began to emigrate. However, due to limited space, they could only bring a small number of belongings with them and family documents were not considered a priority. As a result, individuals started approaching me with boxes of items they wished to sell. I am never leaving Gaza, so I was more than happy to be the caretaker of these goods. Lastly, the real estate business does exist in Gaza, just like anywhere else. In this region, it is common for people to inherit houses from their recently deceased parents or grandparents. But often the children are not interested in taking care of the house and prefer to sell it. As a result, I sometimes purchase small properties that come

with these unique antiques. I fix up the house and sell it, while keeping the antiques for my store. These are the most common ways I acquire these materials.

One day, in the middle of 2022, we were sitting around his shop, as usual, when he ran out to buy us some coffee and tea. When he returned, he grabbed a small table that he had made. He noticed that I was looking at it strangely, so he asked, "How do you like my Hanukkah table?" I replied, "Salim, that is a Pesach plate, for Passover. It's for a different holiday." He chuckled and said, "Oops, I've been telling everyone it's a Hanukkah table!" He then showed me other Judaica items he had in the store, including many menorahs and Star of David necklaces. It was a very unusual sight to see in downtown Gaza City. I asked, "Why do you bother having them in the store? Like, really, who is buying them?" He replied, "If no one would buy them, I wouldn't be selling them or even having them at the store." Perplexed by his answer, I asked where they came from. He said that up until the beginning of the second intifada, he was in regular contact with Israeli antique sellers in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. He mentioned that sometimes he would come across random Judaica items in the boxes he would buy from them. Some items, he mentioned, were left behind by settlers who had vacated settlements in Gaza after the "Disengagement" in August 2005.

The last time I saw Salim was less than a week before the Hamas attack in Israel on 7 October of this year. We had dinner at his family's house, and he showed me the items he had been keeping for me: a fundraising letter sent out by Hajj Amin al-Husayni in 1946 (figure 3), a magazine from the early 1960s called *Palestine*, which featured 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, and a petition written by local Gaza leaders and sent to Palestinian businessmen, urging them to boycott specific Zionist industries.

After the Israelis started their incessant bombing campaign, I messaged Salim every day to inquire about his well-being and his family, offer any assistance I could provide, and ask about their living conditions. The first three days, I received regular responses asking for prayers for his family and the people of Gaza, as well as notes about the intensity of the bombings. After the Israelis demanded that all Palestinians in Gaza City and the northern region evacuate within twenty-four hours, I asked Salim if he and his family would comply. He responded with a firm "no." They were staying in Tal al-Hawa, regardless of the circumstances.

After that day, Salim stopped responding. On WhatsApp, there was only one checkmark, indicating that my message was sent but not received. The next day, I tried calling his phone. After ten seconds, a message appeared stating that the call could not be connected. I tried calling numerous times that day, but had the same end result. As Israel continued its bombing, telecommunication and even regular phone service became extremely difficult. It usually takes five to fifteen attempts to successfully connect a call, and even when it does connect, the calls rarely last more than a few minutes. Around day four of not hearing anything from Salim, I began



Figure 3. The fundraising letter announcing the establishment of Bayt al-Mal al-'Arabi (the Arab House of Money). Photo by author.

to think the worst. I had read reports about intense bombing in Tal al-Hawa and the military issuing numerous threats toward the residents there. One morning, around 1:30 am, I thought to myself, "I always call during the day. What if I try now?" So, I attempted to call his phone, and to my surprise, it actually rang. This was the first time

in over four days. He did not answer, but the ringing meant that he had charged the phone and it was working.

Like the previous days, I tried to call Salim every sixty to ninety minutes throughout the day, making a total of ten to fifteen calls per day. There was never an answer, and the phone did not ring. As I watched the news and continued to read about the devastating bombing of Tal al-Hawa, I became increasingly concerned.

On Saturday, 21 October, around 8pm, I tried calling and it began to ring, for only the second time in almost a week. His daughter then answered, and I cried over the phone, I was so elated to hear their voices. She told me that they were in Dayr al-Balah, in the center of the Gaza Strip. She mentioned that they had no access to electricity or water. Afterward, she passed the phone to Salim. His usual boisterous self and constant laughter were obviously gone. He said, "We had to leave Gaza City. They bombed our house. Jameel is in Shifa hospital." He was in the house when it happened. He should be okay. The house is gone, the neighborhood is gone, Gaza is gone."

I asked if everyone else was okay, and he said, "Yes, we will rebuild. We always rebuild. Gaza has been destroyed by conquerors before, ten times in its history, in fact. My ancestors rebuilt, and I too will rebuild." Despite the awful news, I was just so happy to hear that they were all alive and seemingly okay. Salim said, "I heard, but cannot confirm yet, that they bombed my store too. A few friends told me it's gone. So basically, Israel has erased 150 years of our history, our presence, and our stories in Gaza by destroying my store and home. However, we are determined to rebuild. They are attempting to do to Gaza what they did in Palestine in 1948. Their goal is to eliminate us, and they are beginning with Gaza. But you cannot erase Gaza; we will rebuild it."

Chris Whitman-Abdelkarim is the representative for Medico International in Palestine/Israel. He obtained his MA from Hebrew University in Jerusalem in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies and has worked at a number of Palestinian and Israeli NGOs since 2011 on issues such as labor rights, the Jordan Valley, settlements, and human rights.