

Radical Gentrifiers: The Changing Landscape of Social Action in Jaffa

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Historically known as the “Bride of Palestine” (*‘arus falastin*), Jaffa was the symbol of political modernity and the largest urban center in pre-1948 Palestine (LeVine, 2005). Faced with Zionist expansion, the Arab metropolis underwent radical demographic changes when the majority of its Palestinian population—including most of the local elites—was forced into exile during the hostilities of 1948. Only 3,500 out of the estimated 100,000 members of the Arab population remained. Jaffa, which had been a regional seaport and international trade center under late Ottoman and British rule, was transformed overnight into the notorious and dilapidated “Quarter 7”—Tel-Aviv’s “Arab neighborhood.”

More than 60 years after the Nakba, Jaffa is an ethnically “mixed town” (Rabinowitz & Monterescu, 2008). Located minutes away from Tel-Aviv’s metropolitan center yet marked as *sui generis* cultural and political alterity, it is home to approximately 17,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel (Tel-Aviv-Jaffa Municipality, 2012). Struggling since 1948 to sustain viable collective existence, the Palestinian community makes up a third of Jaffa’s total population and altogether 5 percent of the Tel-Aviv-Jaffa metropolitan demographic composition. For the municipality and the state, Arab Jaffa has long presented a political “problem,” thus resulting in recurrent strategies of containment, surveillance, and control. Nowadays, Arab community members often describe themselves as a “double minority” excluded twice over: First, on the national scale of

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state institutions, and second on the municipal level vis-à-vis the City of Tel-Aviv-Jaffa. Bereft of a united leadership and with no stable middle class to speak of, Palestinians in Jaffa ache for

affordable housing and political recognition.¹ Narrated in terms of an “existential threat,” the community struggles for its survival in the present as it laments its lost past (Monterescu, 2009).

The first decade of the 21st century saw several key events in ethnically mixed towns. In tandem with the breakout of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, the October 2000 events marked an important change in the history of the Palestinian minority in Israel. In Jaffa, Haifa, Ramleh, Lydda, and Acre, these outbreaks resulted in no fatal casualties but unraveled the widening gaps and trust crisis between these cities’ Jewish and Arab residents and the brutal intervention of state policing agencies.

The ongoing crisis further escalated when, in 2007, the Israel Land Administration (ILA) issued 497 evacuation orders to Palestinian families in Jaffa charged with illegal construction². As these families lived in the ‘Ajami neighborhood, a hot-spot of Jewish gentrification, the evacuation was identified as yet another attempt to “transfer” the Arab population out of Jaffa (Figure 1). Soon it became the symbol of the struggle over Palestinian presence and the landmark of resistance to ethno-gentrification. Consisting of both Jewish and Palestinian activists from Jaffa and beyond, the collective mobilization around this constitutive event provided an effective space for political action and new forms of binational collaboration (Monterescu & Shaindlinger, 2013). In the same year, as if responding to the state’s policy of eviction, an urban settlement was established in Jaffa, calling young Jewish activists from the religious nationalist camp to “redeem” the mixed cities and restore the “demographic balance” (Barak, 2011). This brief paper

¹ Due to the fragmentation of the Arab political system in Jaffa and the recurrent disagreements among key community representatives, the *Yafa List* lost its seat at the City Council in the 2013 municipal elections. As opposed to the 3,717 votes it received in the 2008 elections, it secured only 2,195 votes in 2013.

² See the protocol of the Internal Affairs Committee at www.knesset.gov.il/protocols/data/rtf/.../2007-03-20.rtf



delineates in broad strokes two main trends unfolding in Jaffa: the emergence of a radical urban settler movement and the alliance between Palestinian activists and politically-motivated Jews, many of whom qualified as gentrifiers themselves.

“Redeeming” the Mixed Town

In the wake of the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, the settler movement set out on a *Reconquista* operation in mixed towns. With generous support from the government and private associations such as “Jewish Head,” urban settler communities mushroomed in Ramleh (*Amihai*), Lydda (*Elyashiv*), Acre (*Ometz*), and Jaffa (*Shirat Moshe*) (*Ibid.*). Since its inception in 2007, the settlement in Jaffa now includes 51 families occupying Jewish and mixed neighborhoods. The settlements operate a website (<http://www.jaffa.com>) under the banner of a “re-jew-venated Torani community” (Figure 2). The Yeshiva strategically manipulates what they label “the agenda of Tel-Aviv as a heterogeneous city” as blended with territorial expansionism occurring at the expense of the Palestinian population. Tellingly, in a recent tour with Mayor Huldai, the head of the Yeshiva in ‘Ajami, Rabbi Mali (previously of Beit El settlement), was recorded saying, “Every man is entitled to fair treatment except those who are the enemies of the People of Israel” (Kempinsky, 2011). Featuring the figure of Rabbi Kook, one of the founders of religious Zionism and Rabbi of Jaffa in 1904-1916, the movement calls to rid the mixed towns of its Arab legacy and restore Jewish dominance (Figure 3)³.

In May 2009, the Be’emuna (“in faith”) Company won an ILA bid for a residential project in ‘Ajami. Following two years of legal struggle, both the ILA and Supreme Court rejected the belated appeal of 28 Jaffa residents, Bimkom, and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, considering the matter a “fait accompli” (Figure 4). The project, which is already under construction, is expected to be completed by 2015, offering some 20 apartments marketed exclusively for religious Jews.

³ See <http://cafe.themarker.com/post/1460551/> and http://www.yaffo.co.il/article_k.asp?id=246



Gentrifiers Against Gentrification

In the wake of the October 2000 events, the very marking of Jaffa as a space of violent contestation and political mobilization further attracted various groups that have already expressed interest in Jewish-Arab cooperation through actual residence in the city, including: hippy communes yearning for Mediterranean and multi-cultural exoticism (which have settled in Jaffa since the 1990s); individual leftists coming for ideological reasons to implement co-existence on the ground; binational youth communes; and Jewish-Arab mixed couples who cannot find their place in Tel-Aviv. Finally, the October 2000 events also attracted political Palestinian-Israeli groups that are directly engaged with conflict-related activism, such as Anarchists Against the Wall, Re`ut-Sadaqa (“Friendship”), Ta`ayush or Tarabut (“Jewish-Arab Partnership”), and the Zochrot (“Remembering”) Association. The crucial role of both Jewish and Arab activists from outside the city is remarkable. While these diverse groups followed different biographical paths and organizational itineraries, consequently promoting diverging agendas, they all share a common fascination with the potential of meaning and purpose the contested city has to offer, either through political activism or individual self-searching.

Against the twin forces of settlers and gentrification, new actors came to the fore drawing on existing coalitions. While Palestinian activism in Jaffa has been well established—notably with the ongoing activities of the *Rabita* (the League for the Jaffa Arabs) from the late 1970s and the more recent *Darna* (Popular Committee for Land and Housing) established in 2007—new Jewish activists have become increasingly visible. “A large, significant portion of the radical scene from Jerusalem has moved to Jaffa,” I was told by an ex-Jerusalemite alternative musician who relocated to the city in 2007. A mirror image of the settlers’ new interest in mixed towns, left-leaning Jews have become involved in anti-gentrification activism while at the same time being part of the city’s gentrification. In the process they are rebranding Jaffa as an alternative cultural space. Some deliberately chose to “live in the open wound” as one gentrifier put it, mobilizing memory and trauma as an expressive means for political art. An important example is the project “The ghost of Manshiyya awakes” by artist Ronen Eidelman (2007), in which soccer field marking equipment and simple paint rollers were used to mark the layout of



the now-demolished Palestinian Manshiyya neighborhood as a means to protest the neighborhood's erasure and to imagine its resurrection. For many, however, the political commitment to Jaffa is fused with the emergence of new spaces of consumption.

One of the important outcomes of the October 2000 events was the founding of the Yafa Café—the first bookstore in Jaffa since 1948 to systematically specialize in books in Arabic. Led by Dina Lee, a Jewish gentrifier, and her Palestinian business partner Michel Rahib, Yafa Café paved the way for other cultural establishment that blend business, leisure, and politics to reclaim Palestinian cultural space. Cafés and clubs such as the “vegan-friendly” Abu Dhabi-Kaymak Café, the hip cosmopolitan Anna Loulou Bar, and the Palestinian Café Salma point to the unintended outcomes of conflict and profit-oriented gentrification. Recent attempts, such as *Tarakeh Fawreyeh*, complicate this nexus even further by channeling cultural and leisurely activities directly into political action⁴.

Reflecting the ongoing radicalization of Jaffa's cityscape, the opposing processes of urban settlements, anti-gentrification activism, and alternative cultures should not be read as disconnected phenomena; rather, they are part and parcel of the broader re-signification of mixed towns as spaces of political action.

⁴ Under the slogan “Music/Art/Struggle/Rave—Struggle for Home,” the event was a co-production of Anna Loulou Bar and the Jaffa Project—Autobiography of a City. It took place in September 2012 at the Saraya Arabic-Hebrew Theater (aka the Jaffa 2030 Visitor Center). As the event advertised, “For one evening we will revive old city Jaffa from its constant death to a clear night, and to a bright imagined future that does not give up the connection with the surrounding Arab World. An Art and Music Movement aware of where it all started from, and to where we are all heading.” The event revenues were donated to cover the legal expenses of the Popular Committee for Housing Struggle in Jaffa. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/443623622347895/?ref=ts>



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מיפוי של 210 מפונים מתוך 497
מנתונים של מ.מ.ישראל

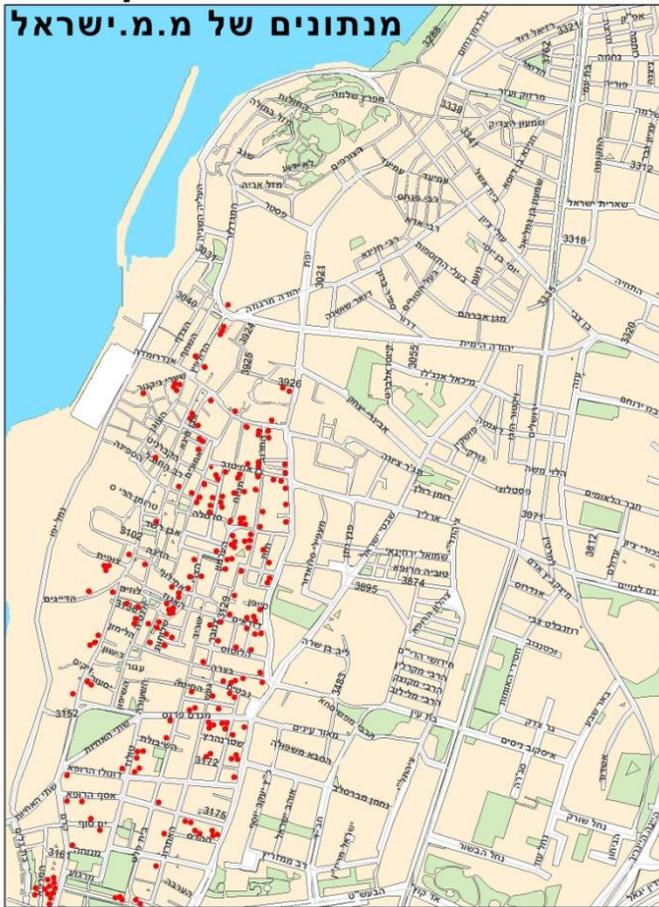


Figure 1. A map of the Israel Land Administration plan to evacuate 497 Palestinian families from their houses (distributed by the Popular Committee for Land and Housing in Jaffa).

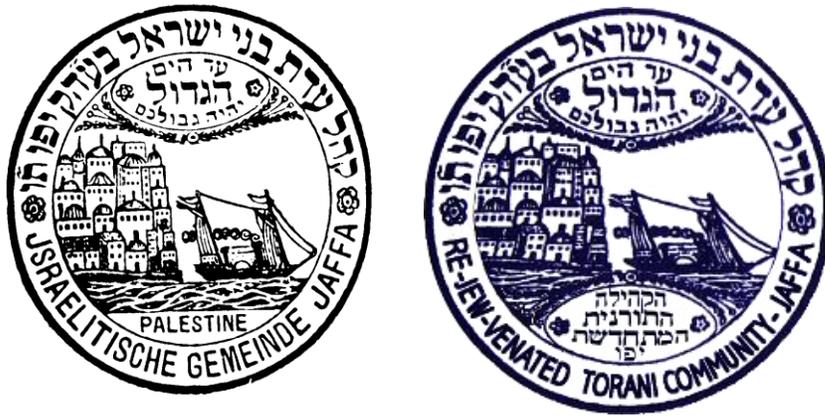


Figure 2. The historic seal of the Jewish community of Jaffa (1892), bearing the biblical phrase “Unto the Great sea shall be your coast” (left), and the redesigned logo of the Jewish settlement (right): “Re-Jew-venated Torani Community—Jaffa” (2012).



Figure 3. The logo of the Jaffa Yeshiva featuring the figure of Rabbi Kook, Jaffa’s Rabbi circa 1904.



Figure 4. The graffiti reads: “Settlers Out. It is Not Hebron Here. Jaffa in No Real-Estate” (2012).