

“Palestinian Cities in Israel: Between the Past, Present, and Future”

Editorial

Areej Sabbagh-Khoury*

The subject of the current issue of *Jadal* is those Palestinian cities that were seized during the Nakba in 1948 and in which a Palestinian population remained; namely, Jaffa, Lydda, Ramle, Haifa, and Acre. These cities are given various designations, of which the term “mixed cities” is one of the most prevalent among their Palestinians residents today. The majority of the Jewish residents of these cities, however, regard them as Jewish cities.

The issue briefly addresses the role that Palestinian cities began to play before 1948, and raises questions such as: How did the Zionist movement view and contend with the Palestinian city? What policy or policies do the Israeli establishment and Jewish settlers pursue in some of these cities? In what conditions do Palestinians live in these “mixed cities”, and how do they perceive Israel’s policies towards them? What is the status of Palestinians in these cities, and in what ways do they try to ensure their continued collective existence in them?

The devastation of urban life in Palestine was an important consequence of the Nakba. However, the history of the Palestinians who remained in these cities, or were expelled to them, has not yet been completed. Despite the recent publication of a number of Palestinian studies on the history of these cities, the history of the Palestinians who remained in them—especially during the first,

***Areej Sabbagh-Khoury** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Social Sciences and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University, and a research associate at Mada al-Carmel—Arab Center for Applied Social Research.



formative years after they fell under Israeli control—is still understudied. While some research has touched upon the ethnic cleansing of these cities, it has focused more on the expulsion itself, rather than the effort to remain, and on Israeli policies rather than Palestinians’ experience and survival in each of these five cities. In addition, the question of Palestinian cities has not yet assumed a central place in the political discourse of the Palestinian leadership inside Israel.

While this issue of *Jadal* cannot suffice to give Palestinian cities the emphasis they deserve, it nonetheless constitutes an attempt to open a discussion on Palestinian cities and the conditions of the Palestinians living in them. Mada al-Carmel—Arab Center for Applied Social Research contributed to an issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* (in Arabic) on Jaffa and its history (see: [“Yaffa \(Jaffa\): Roots, Home, and Homeland”](#)) because we believe it is important for Palestinians to contend with the history of these cities and the reality of the Palestinians who live in them. We therefore dedicate the current issue of *Jadal* to the history and the present of some of these cities, to the ethnic cleansing of the majority of their populations, to the effect that the absence of these cities has had on the Palestinian cultural scene, and to the possibilities for Palestinian society to organize itself within them. This issue is an effort to give the subject of Palestinian cities greater prominence, and to help reinvigorate the discussion around them and their history.

My own article in this issue, “Palestinians in Palestinian Cities in Israel: A Settler Colonial Reality,” provides a general background on the Palestinian population of these cities and the basis for referring to these Palestinian cities as “mixed cities”. It also discusses the settler colonial policies of the State of Israel that aim to erase Palestinian history, reduce the number of Palestinians living in these cities, and exclude them from the city space. It then describes the special characteristics of the Palestinian inhabitants of these cities, as compared to the general Palestinian population in Israel. The article argues that the Palestinian history of these cities is



now being tackled, and that it is being raised within official Palestinian political discourse in articulating the relationship with the State of Israel. The revival of the Palestinian history of these cities is connected to the collective activism of their Palestinian residents, orchestrated through the various organizations and associations that work there. This renewed emphasis is also a result of the activities of the Arab political parties in these cities, as was clearly evident, for example, in the October 2013 local elections, during which the cities' history featured in the electoral campaigns of some of these parties.

In his article, **Joel Bein** discusses the type of relationships that prevailed between Palestinians and Jews in certain cities, away from the Zionist movement's influence. Bein contends that the main Jewish presence in Palestine was in the cities, and was based on coexistence between Jews and Arabs. In his article, Bein depicts a historical moment before the Zionist project established its control over the Jewish population in the cities, and proposes a different historical narrative, of a Palestinian-Jewish presence within a shared space. Through reviewing the history, the article sets forth an alternative possibility, of addressing the Arab-Jewish presence in the shared space of these cities beyond the parameters of the settler ideology. Bein also touches on the ethnic cleansing operations that were executed by the various branches of Zionist movement in many of these cities, and the complete ethnic cleansing of Safad and Tiberias, which had a large Jewish presence before the Nakba, and of Beisan. Bein states that today's "mixed cities" are a product of an incomplete process of ethnic cleansing and the large-scale settlement of Eastern Jewish immigrants in Jaffa, Acre, Lydda, and Ramle. In Haifa and Jerusalem, meanwhile, Arab homes were mainly taken over by Ashkenazi Jews.

Johnny Mansour guides us through the histories of Acre and Haifa prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in an attempt to shed light on Palestinian life pre-Nakba. He highlights the economic, social, and political roles that the two cities had begun to play on the Palestinian stage. Mansour further discusses the course taken by the Israeli state since the Nakba in these two cities, describing the harsh



consequences on the Arab population of the Israeli establishment's policies of Judaization and exclusion.

In his article, **Haim Yacobi** presents the city of Lydda as a model of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian cities that took place during and after the Nakba. The article describes the occupation of the city, and how the Palestinians who remained were prevented from returning to their homes. The author argues that while the Israeli state implemented policies of Judaization in Lydda since the state's inception, aiming to control the "demographic balance" between Jews and Palestinians, these policies were accompanied by the counter-process of internal migration by Palestinians and the natural growth of the Palestinian population. These two factors have defied the "demographic balance" that the State of Israel has attempted to preserve since it captured the city. The author further maintains that what is referred to as the "unofficial construction" of Palestinian houses and the protests against house demolitions in Lydda, together with the provision of municipal services by various Palestinian or Jewish-Arab organizations operating in the city, constitute an alternative model that challenges the Government's planning policies.

Daniel Monterescu discusses the city of Jaffa, which was commonly known as the "bride of the sea" at the time when it was the largest urban center in Palestine. The author briefly describes the ethnic cleansing of the city during the Nakba, the Israeli establishment's policy towards it, and the attempts of the Palestinian inhabitants to maintain a collective presence in it. Monterescu then outlines the phenomenon of the gentrification of present-day Jaffa, which entails the transformation of poor neighborhoods into rich ones via the purchase of real estate by wealthy individuals and private companies. Monterescu sheds light on two major current trends in Jaffa, the first being the settlement activities carried out by a settler movement that is supported by the state's policy of 'cleansing' the old Arab neighborhoods of Jaffa of their 'Arabness'. The second trend is the alliance that has formed between Palestinian activists and some Jewish residents of Jaffa, many of whom come to the city as part of the process of gentrification. In this regard, however, I believe it is



important to place these events within the wider context of the Zionist settler colonial project, in order better to understand the phenomenon the author describes. In contrast to other cities in the world, where the gentrification process has a class dimension, the nationalist-settler nature of the Israeli state, and its objective of erasing the Palestinian space, converges with the interests of the Jewish capital owners who seek to make a profit from investing in poor Arab neighborhoods.

Ala Hlehel maps out the Palestinian cultural scene in Israel in the absence of the city. He indicates that the Nakba and the absence of the city eliminated one of the main pillars of cultural creativity: the 'city square'. The city square protects creativity from the "intimacy of the countryside", and is usually the location of significant cultural production. Hlehel does not dismiss the possibility of cultural production in the countryside, but rather stresses the unique nature of the city square and its role in cultural production. The Palestinian city, whose internal fabric has been destroyed and whose landmark features have been altered, has come to exist in memory. According to Hlehel, this "imagined Palestinian city" has been a hothouse for a generation of Palestinian intellectuals. The author states that the Palestinian city has not been absent from the works of playwrights and filmmakers, who have, in fact, continuously attempted to evoke the city. In light of his hypothesis of the absence of the city as a site and the distorted culture of the countryside, Hlehel poses some important questions: "How can a true city be founded without a true countryside? Where will the new generation of writers, producers, and innovators come to the city from, to ask new questions, if not from a true countryside?"

We regard this issue of *Jadal* as an initial step towards raising the subject of the Palestinian city in Israel, including both those cities in which Palestinians remained (Jaffa, Lydda, Ramle, Haifa, and Acre), and those in which they did not (Safad, Tiberias, and Beisan).



Some of the articles focus on historical aspects of these cities, while others address their present circumstances, the means by which their Palestinian residents challenge Israeli policies there, and the possibility of cooperation between Arabs and Jews on a binational basis.

However, many important questions have yet to be raised and answered in depth. For example: What are the prospects of the political action to which the residents of these cities and their leadership aspire? What effect has the absence of the Palestinian city, and the restriction of opportunities in those cities whose Palestinian populations were not displaced, on Palestinian culture in Israel? What is the Palestinian leadership's vision for these cities and their cultural and political roles, given the Israeli establishment's almost total control over them? Does referring to Nazareth as the capital of the Arab community mean 'abandoning' other Palestinian cities? Do we merely want to secure the prospects of the city that has 'remained'? Or must we also raise the issues of the Palestinian cities that fell under the control of the Israeli establishment, which sought to Judaize via its settler colonial project, as one way of reordering our relationship with the State of Israel and dealing with our history and the Palestinian question? Is there a collective vision of how to deal with these cities—and with the Palestinians who remain there—as a group, or does each city present a special case?

These are some of the questions that must be addressed, discussed and answered in a broader context. We hope that this issue of *Jadal* will encourage Palestinian society to continue to ask these and other questions, and to search for the answers.

