

# The Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery: Israeli Encroachment Continues Unabated



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In this brief report, the preeminent Palestinian expert on the archaeology of Jerusalem, Nazmi Jubeh, recapitulates the history of the city's three major Muslim burial grounds, particularly the Bab al-Rahmah cemetery. After outlining the millennial history of the cemetery, Jubeh places the assaults on Bab al-Rahmah, and the desecration of other Muslim cemeteries, in the context of Israel's efforts to Judaize Jerusalem—a policy that has been under way since the occupation of the eastern sector of the city during the June 1967 war. Jubeh reflects on decades of such Israeli efforts to eliminate or obfuscate the city's non-Jewish cultural landscape and on the equally persistent attempts by Palestinians to resist the historical and cultural erasure of Jerusalem's Arab and Muslim heritage.

THE BAB AL-RAHMAH CEMETERY, which lies along the eastern wall of the Old City of Jerusalem, has been subject to encroachment for years as the Israeli authorities seek to gain control of East Jerusalem and its surroundings, especially the Haram al-Sharif.<sup>1</sup> The plan aims to transform Jerusalem's cultural landscape to create a panorama that corresponds to an exclusivist narrative of the city's history, in which a major and millennial Muslim cemetery has no role. According to the plan, details of which surface from time to time, all the components of the new vista will lead to the Western Wall (known as the Wailing Wall to Jews and the Buraq Wall to Muslims), erasing any material evidence of Jerusalem's borders prior to 4 June 1967, when Israel occupied the eastern part of the city. In addition to emphasizing the city's Jewish heritage and eliding anything at variance with this dominant narrative, the plan seeks to advance the appearance of complete integration between the eastern and western halves of the city, thereby realizing the now fifty-year-old mantra that Jerusalem is the united capital of the State of Israel.

Over the last half century, East Jerusalem has been gradually encircled by more and more settlements, and by the so-called separation wall. Palestinian neighborhoods are also being fragmented from within as settlers take over an increasing number of properties in the heart of residential neighborhoods, and the government pursues its cable car project linking East Jerusalem directly with West Jerusalem. After demolishing the Moroccan Quarter (Harat al-Maghariba) with its homes, mosques, and shrines in 1967 to build a vast open plaza before the Western Wall, the Israelis took full control of the southwestern to northwestern corners of the wall (a distance of 485 meters) by opening a tunnel under it in 1995. This was ostensibly to carry out excavations for

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archaeological evidence of the Second Temple. They did the same to gain control of the Haram's southern wall (280 meters), converting the area to its south into what is touted as an archaeological park that purports to tell the story of the Temple.

Taking control of the Haram's eastern wall was the next step in the process of transforming Jerusalem, and in particular the Old City, into an exclusively Jewish-Israeli city. The basic obstacle there was the existence of an Islamic cemetery that ran the entire length of the wall. Dating back more than fourteen centuries, the cemetery is the repository of Muslim Jerusalemites' collective memory.<sup>2</sup> The Israeli authorities have used a variety of pretexts to encroach on the cemetery—invoking the need to uncover archaeological remains because of the area's significance for the history of the Temple, or designating the area as a national park, but especially by denying that Bab al-Rahmah was a cemetery at all. Disregarding both its rightful owners and what it means to the city's Palestinian inhabitants, the authorities claim the right to do with Bab al-Rahmah as they please.

## Jerusalem's Muslim Cemeteries

In the Islamic faith, death in Jerusalem is associated with the Day of Judgment, and Muslims from every part of the world have been buried there since the dawn of Islam. Over the centuries, military leaders, scholars, administrators, and politicians came to the holy city in their old age to die and be buried in al-Aqsa's vicinity. As a result, three major Muslim cemeteries—Bab al-Rahmah, Mamilla, and Bab al-Sahira—developed in the city, in addition to smaller burial sites, most of which date from the Mamluk period (1250–1517 C.E.). A number of Mamluk commanders oversaw the erection of public buildings (schools, Sufi lodges, hospices, and so on) in which they reserved a room for their own tomb. Streets in the Old City, such as Bab al-Silsila, are lined with Mamluk public buildings, a few of which are dedicated mausoleums. Before this, the Ikhshidids, who ruled Egypt, the Levant, and the Hijaz from 935–69 C.E., similarly sought burial in Jerusalem even though their commanders died in Cairo. Muslim cemeteries began to proliferate soon after the advent of Islam, but this is hard to prove because of the many changes Jerusalem underwent during the Crusader period (1099–1187 C.E.). It can be demonstrated, however, that all three major cemeteries have been in existence at least since the Ayyubids, who ruled the city after ousting the Crusaders in 1187. Of the three cemeteries, Bab al-Rahmah alone can be shown to go back to the time of the Muslim conquest.

Jerusalem's Muslim cemeteries represent a social space not only for the dead but also for the living, and they are inseparable from the city's day-to-day life. Today, the cemeteries are in a state of disarray: Mamilla Cemetery, in what became West Jerusalem, was lost in 1948 and both Bab al-Sahira and Bab al-Rahmah cannot expand further—the former because it straddles residential and commercial neighborhoods, and the latter because of Israeli restrictions in addition to the aforementioned encroachment activities (which will be expanded upon below).<sup>3</sup> The cemeteries are badly overcrowded, resulting from the large population increase over the last five decades, and are unable to meet the need for new graves.

Ongoing land confiscation by the Israeli authorities in East Jerusalem means that not only is there insufficient space to construct new homes for the living, but that the dead are also being

thrown out of their resting places as old graves are opened and reused. It is estimated that by the end of the coming decade, the Palestinian inhabitants of the city will no longer have any space in which to bury their dead. Currently, the city's estimated Palestinian population stands at 370,000, and if one assumes that there is at least one death per day (sometimes several funerals leave Haram al-Sharif at the same time), it is not difficult to imagine how Israeli encroachment on the city's cemeteries impacts both the burial grounds themselves and the Palestinian inhabitants' connection to their city.

### ***Mamilla***

Mamilla, which lies less than one kilometer west of Jaffa Gate, and covers an area of about 168 dunams (41 acres), became the object of much public attention when Israel desecrated the cemetery in order to erect the so-called Museum of Tolerance over hundreds of Muslim graves. It is not known precisely when Muslims started using Mamilla, but the evidence suggests that the site was already in use as a burial ground before the advent of Islam. What is certain is that after the Crusaders laid siege to Jerusalem in 1099 C.E., the bodies of tens of thousands of those they massacred were thrown there. Consequently, Mamilla became known as a Muslim martyrs' cemetery, where once it had been a cemetery for Christian martyrs who had been killed by the thousands by the Persians and their Jewish allies in 614 C.E., shortly before the Muslim conquest.<sup>4</sup> During Crusader rule, the clergy of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were also buried in Mamilla. Under the rule of Salah al-Din al Ayyubi (Saladin), from 1187 C.E., walls were built around the cemetery and maintenance was improved. From that time, Mamilla remained in use as a Muslim cemetery continuously until 1948, when it fell under Israeli control.

Mamilla is associated with the collective memory of Jerusalemites from Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman times, down to the Mandate period. Many of the city's notables, both lay and religious, were buried there. Kamil al-Asali, a historian of Jerusalem's Islamic heritage, cites more than 150 such notables by name. In addition to a large Roman pool, the cemetery featured several Islamic buildings of architectural value, such as the fourteenth-century *zawiya* of the Qalandari Sufi order, which is no longer standing, and the Hawsh al-Bastamiya from the Mamluk period. The *hawsh* (enclosure) has disappeared, along with others, but the thirteenth-century Kabakiya Dome,<sup>5</sup> one of the most important Islamic buildings outside the city walls, has survived.<sup>6</sup>

The Israeli authorities began to chip away gradually at the cemetery from all sides following the establishment of the state in 1948. Buildings (including what became the Waldorf Astoria Jerusalem), gardens, streets, and parking lots were erected on various parts of the cemetery, with graves being uncovered and removed so as not to impede construction. The most recent such project to encroach on Mamilla is Israel's Museum of Tolerance.<sup>7</sup> With more than one thousand graves desecrated—because they were either excavated, bulldozed, or destroyed—all that remains today is an area less than one-fifth of Mamilla's original size, scattered among buildings and surrounding streets and largely hidden from view.

### ***Bab al-Sahira***

A few dozen meters to the north of the Old City wall, on a rocky hill overlooking Jerusalem, stands Bab al-Sahira Cemetery. It is not known when this site was first used as a burial ground but historical and archaeological evidence suggests that it was soon after the advent of Islam,<sup>8</sup>

since the site is associated with verses fourteen and fifteen of Surat al-Nazi‘at (chapter 79) in the Qur‘an. While there remains no trace of elements predating the Crusader period, it is known that a large number of troops killed in battle with the Crusaders were buried there, and that the cemetery expanded outward in the subsequent Ayyubid period until it took over that entire area outside the Old City. From the second half of the nineteenth century onward, Jerusalem’s expansion north of Bab al-Sahira effectively swallowed up those sections of the cemetery where the graves were more sparse, leaving modern-day Bab al-Sahira squeezed between the Bab al-‘Amud (Damascus Gate) bus station and Salah al-Din Street. Nothing significant is left of the historic graves except for a few Mamluk and Ottoman gravestones, and of course thousands of others that date from the twentieth century and later. Al-Asali provides a long list of prominent clerics and administrators who were buried in Bab al-Sahira, especially in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Long History of Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery***

Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery extends along the Old City’s eastern wall, which is 891 meters long, including the 460-meter section that constitutes the eastern wall of the Haram al-Sharif. The cemetery ground is intersected by Bab al-Asbat (Lions’ Gate) and the road leading to it; the northern half of the cemetery is often referred to as the Yusufiyya Graveyard, while the southern half continues to be called Bab al-Rahmah. Although they are regarded as separate, the two should be viewed as a single burial ground.<sup>10</sup>

The Yusufiyya segment of the cemetery, lying to the north of Bab al-Asbat, extends along the city walls to the northeastern corner of the Old City. Covering an area of four dunams (one acre), Yusufiyya is also known as Ard al-Muzaffar because it is a family waqf of Jerusalem’s Muzaffar family. Yusufiyya has borne its share of depredation: in 2014, the Israeli occupation authorities banned burials there and removed the graves of more than twenty Jordanian soldiers killed in 1967 who had been buried in what is known as the Martyrs’ Graveyard. The western end of the Yusufiyya Cemetery, by the wall, is subject to daily confiscations and bulldozing, starting from the Suq al-Jumaa/livestock market area, which the occupation authorities use as a garbage collection point. Some of Yusufiyya had already been appropriated in the 1970s and converted into a wide pathway for recreational walkers and joggers around the city walls, furthering the project to transform that whole area into a so-called national park. Today, the Israeli-run Municipality of Jerusalem claims that the excavations and other works under way in Yusufiyya aim merely to develop and beautify the city.

The Yusufiyya Cemetery is bordered by two empty lots to the north. The first is relatively large (about four dunams or one acre) and is close to the northeastern corner of the Old City. At the end of the Ottoman period, during the Mandate period, and under Jordanian rule until 1967, the area was used as a livestock market. As the cemetery filled up, and the graves began to extend in that direction, the Israeli authorities put a stop to the cemetery’s northward creep, erecting a wall around the area, and turning it into a garbage collection point. The second empty lot, which lies to the east and is about half the size of the first, includes the remains of, and a memorial to, the Unknown Soldier. On Muslim holidays, prominent Jerusalemites visit the cemetery to honor those who have fallen in Jerusalem’s defense and are buried in the aforementioned Martyrs’ Graveyard. The late Faisal

Husseini and a group of other notables usually did this on the mornings of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, and the practice continues to this day. Most recently, on 19 April 2018, Israeli bulldozers were back in this part of the cemetery, clearing more graves and some of the old stone steps. The bulldozing reached several meters below current ground level, effectively cordoning off the area and creating more new “facts on the ground.”

In the past, Yusufiyya Cemetery had been the exclusive domain of Jerusalem’s notable families (the so-called *a’yan*) with each allotted a particular area, making it possible to trace the graves of many successive generations within the same family. After 1967, however, the graves started to get mixed up. Because of overcrowding, spaces between graves or between family plots that had formerly been vacant were filled in, and the paths between the graves disappeared. In addition, it became standard practice to mix in new graves with old ones. While such actions have affected the cemetery’s structure, and many historic gravestones have disappeared, one can still find some that date back to Ottoman or even Mamluk times.

The southern part of Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery, which extends from Bab al-Asbat southward and is flanked to the west by the eastern wall of the Haram, is considered Jerusalem’s oldest Muslim cemetery. In it are buried the first wave of Muslims who settled in Jerusalem after the Islamic conquest of the city in about 638 C.E. Evidence for this includes the graves of several companions of the Prophet: Ubadah ibn al-Samit (died 34 A.H./664 C.E.), the first Muslim judge appointed in Palestine; Shaddad ibn Aws (died 58 A.H./667 C.E.), a jurist who governed Homs until he moved to Jerusalem, where he died; and Thabit Dhu al-Asabi’ al-Tamimi, who hailed from Yemen and settled in Jerusalem after the Muslim conquest. These men were followed by a large number of prominent Muslims from the generation subsequent to the Prophet’s, and from all the Islamic periods afterward: sheikhs, scholars, and public figures, as well as martyrs from the 1948–67 period, the two intifadas (1987 and 2000), the 1990 al-Aqsa massacre, and the 1996 unrest over the tunnel excavation are all buried there. None of the “Jerusalem families” is without a plot in Bab al-Rahmah, where beautifully constructed and often ornate graves date from every historical period. Many of these feature elaborately carved inscriptions, sometimes referencing the famed Jerusalem villages of Lifta, Qalunya, Imwas, and Deir Yassin.

Fourteen centuries after its establishment, the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery remains an important repository of Jerusalemites’ memory and a landmark to which the city’s inhabitants are deeply connected. As attested to by the writings of Muslim and other travelers, the cemetery has been a focal point of interest for visitors to the city throughout the ages.

## Bab al-Rahmah: The Monumental Gate

Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery takes its name from one of the monumental gates to the Haram al-Sharif compound. In the Islamic tradition, that gate is known as Bab al-Rahmah wal-Tawbah (the Gate of Mercy and Repentance),<sup>11</sup> and it is also known as the Golden Gate. Standing along the eastern wall of the city, about two hundred meters south of Bab al-Asbat, it is the most beautiful of Jerusalem’s monumental gates, leading from the eastern sector of the city directly into the compound. The gate is associated with a great deal of religious lore, especially about the Day of Judgement, making it more significant than the other city gates. The structure could be viewed

as an architectural conceit in the vein of a Roman triumphal arch. Never destined for daily use, the gate has always had immense symbolic importance, and its superb construction confers on it a special status.<sup>12</sup>

There are detailed accounts of Bab al-Rahmah in a large number of books on the merits of Jerusalem. Attesting to its importance since the earliest days of Islam, the gate is mentioned in numerous early Islamic sources.<sup>13</sup> It appears repeatedly in Frankish, and later Islamic, accounts which describe its alternating function as a small church during the Crusader period and as a mosque in the Islamic period that followed. Ibn Shaddad (died 1285 C.E.) says the following about the gate: "On the eastern side [of Jerusalem] stands Bab al-Rahmah, which remains closed and is opened only at the Olive Festival [Palm Sunday] and on other such occasions."<sup>14</sup> Ibn Fadlallah al-Umari (1347 C.E.), who gives a detailed account of the gate and its dimensions that largely accord with current dimensions, describes it in similar fashion, calling the gate a mosque since it had a mihrab inside it and an imam was appointed to serve there.<sup>15</sup>

As was the case with other monumental gates leading directly into the mosque compound, large stones were placed on the outside of the gate in order to protect the entire area. The closure of the Bab al-Rahmah gate might also be attributable to the growth of the eponymous cemetery, since walking among graves in order to reach the mosque compound was considered inappropriate. The gate, built in the Umayyad style of architecture, is an important landmark in Jerusalem, one which is rare not only in Palestine but in other parts of the Islamic world. Retaining its original form essentially unchanged, it is a unique example of its kind—one that should be viewed as a symbolic memorial that relays an essentially religious story, rather than as a gateway in the functional sense of the term.

Bab al-Rahmah was opened on many religious occasions during the Crusader period, especially on Palm Sunday and on 14 September, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, as reported by John of Würzburg in 1160 C.E.<sup>16</sup> and by Theoderich of Würzburg in 1172 C.E.<sup>17</sup> Saewulf, who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1102–3 C.E., confirms the many symbolisms of the gate in the Christian tradition, mentioning Jesus's passage through the gate on his way into Jerusalem on what has become Palm Sunday, and referencing the story that Emperor Heraclius traversed the gate carrying the so-called True Cross after recovering it from the Persians.<sup>18</sup> The last extant description of the gate before it was sealed with stones is that of al-Nabulsi in 1694 C.E.<sup>19</sup>

Although the sealing of the gate was long attributed to the Ayyubids, the gate is most likely to have been sealed with stones sometime after the seventeenth century. In earlier periods, it had featured wooden doors, as mentioned by the Persian traveller Nasir-i Khusraw, who visited Jerusalem in 1047 C.E.<sup>20</sup> Khusraw made much of the doors' ornateness, possibly reading various meanings into their decorative features. While there is no detailed description of the wooden doors that predates his, there are later accounts: one is by Daniel the Traveller, a Russian pilgrim and travel writer (1106 C.E.), whose short description matches that of Khusraw in that it mentions the existence of two wooden doors plated with gilded copper.<sup>21</sup> The four wooden panels (two leaves for each door) survived into the Ottoman period as recorded by the aforementioned al-Nabulsi.<sup>22</sup> The Ottomans removed these and sealed the openings at an unspecified later date.

Experts agree that the gate dates back to the Umayyad period, meaning that it was built in the context of the grand Umayyad project for the extension of al-Aqsa Mosque. Based on the



FIG 1. Bab al-Rahmah wal-Tawbah, with the cemetery in the foreground. (1865, Charles Wilson, Ordinance Survey of Jerusalem)

historical and architectural contexts, construction of the gate can be attributed to ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, who commissioned the construction of the Dome of the Rock at the site of al-Aqsa Mosque in 692 C.E. The gate consists of an elevated and massive stone structure, roughly square in shape, with an independent gatehouse that is an exquisite example of Umayyad craftsmanship. Two small rooms were added on the roof, which later became a watchtower during the rule of Suleyman the Magnificent, the Ottoman sultan. It is said that the philosopher, jurist, and mystic, al-Ghazali (died 1111 C.E.), lived there for years when he resided in Jerusalem (the rooms are known as al-Ghazali’s Dome). If that story is true, it is likely that they were removed when the Ottoman walls were rebuilt in the sixteenth century.

Since 2003, the Israeli authorities have prevented the Islamic Waqf from using the gatehouse, which consists of a large hall, a small mosque, and a madrasa. The space used to be the headquarters of the Islamic Waqf Heritage Committee, but after the occupation authorities designated the committee a “banned organization,” they closed off the gatehouse. The Islamic Waqf has been calling for its reopening ever since.<sup>23</sup> During the Bab al-Asbat unrest in July 2017—when Israeli forces stormed the Haram al-Sharif compound, expelling all the workers and guards from the mosque buildings and open areas of the precinct—reports circulated that some of the gatehouse stones had been tampered with from the inside. It transpired that some sort of hasty excavation took place, when stones were removed and then quickly placed back in random order, suggesting that some plan is afoot with respect to this historic building. Attempted tampering with the gate is not new: after East Jerusalem was occupied in 1967, then-defense minister Moshe Dayan

tried to force the gate open from the outside. A further attempt to tamper with the gate occurred in 2002 when a tunnel was dug into the gatehouse by way of a communal grave called al-Mawlawiyya dating from the Ottoman period. The Islamic Waqf discovered the attempt and thwarted it.

## Israeli Encroachments

Bab al-Rahmah is at the heart of Israeli plans for the eponymous cemetery, as evidenced by the recent proliferation of settler activities in the area. According to Mustafa Abu Zahra, the chairman of the Committee for the Preservation of Islamic Cemeteries in Jerusalem, in July 2018 a group of settlers, protected by Israeli army soldiers, broke into the cemetery as dozens of young Palestinian volunteers were carrying out cleaning work there.<sup>24</sup> Intent on provocation, the settlers performed Talmudic prayers outside the gate, and scuffles followed, with the Israeli soldiers threatening to detain any Palestinians who challenged the settlers. The fact that the gatehouse has long remained closed (some fifteen years) and that maintenance and repair work have been prohibited by the Israeli authorities as the building deteriorates are clear indications of the greater plan afoot.

In 2013, maps circulated in ruling Likud Party circles designating a large area, extending from the gate all the way to the mosque, as a site for Jewish religious ceremonies on special occasions and holidays. Today, groups of settlers can be seen swarming the plaza of the compound and heading straight for the gate. As periodic statements and religious rulings are released proclaiming the sanctity of the site to Jews, encroachments build by increments. The script is the same as the one followed in other instances of encroachment, notably with regard to the takeover of the medieval pilgrims' hospice, Ribat al-Kurd, also known as Hawsh al-Shihabi, which lies along the western wall of the compound and is contiguous with the Bab al-Hadid gate. In the 1980s, it was announced that a part of the Western Wall had been discovered there and a small group of settlers rushed to visit it, whereupon the area started being called the "Small Western (Wailing) Wall"; soon prayers were being held at the site, with Israeli security forces positioned nearby to protect worshippers, and before long this had evolved into full-blown Israeli military control of the area and the installation of a metal barrier cordoning off Jewish worshippers from the Palestinian families who lived in the Ribat. Shortly thereafter, the surrounding area was closed off on special Jewish occasions, the site was then converted into a prayer hall, and by 2011, the wall of Ribat al-Kurd was declared to be a Jewish holy site, although nowhere is it mentioned in any Jewish sources.<sup>25</sup>

What happened at Ribat al-Kurd had nothing to do with the sanctity of the site. It was a matter of seizing control of the area and finding new ways to pressure Palestinians into leaving the Old City. If the Ribat al-Kurd model were applied to the rest of Jerusalem, every inch of the city could be transformed into a Jewish holy site, as every location can be linked to some religious story or symbol.

## The Latest Depredations

The Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery reemerged in the media in the summer of 2018 as a result of two ongoing Israeli projects: the first, by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) further encroaching on the southern part of the cemetery and banning Muslims from going there, with a



view toward zoning the area as a so-called national park; and second, the Jerusalem cable car project, set to traverse the Old City to link it to West Jerusalem, with a station planned right on top of the part of the cemetery that extends from the southern end of the Old City wall and the southeastern corner of the Haram al-Sharif. After appropriating the southern wall on the pretext of unearthing archeological remains—although the most important remains found in the area were from Umayyad palaces that were no longer standing—both the antiquities and parks authorities have now set their sights on this part of the cemetery.

The southeastern wall of the city is also the wall of Solomon's Stables (al-Musalla al-Marwani), which, by the end of the twentieth century, had become structurally compromised, giving rise to a dispute over who would carry out the necessary repairs. The Islamic Waqf claimed the privilege on the grounds that the area was an inseparable part of the Haram al-Sharif wall whose collapse would lead to further deterioration in the courtyards and buildings of the compound. The Israeli authorities, on the other hand, argued that it was their responsibility, on the grounds that the area formed a part of the city walls. After a protracted dispute, during which the wall was in danger of collapse, it was agreed that Jordan would carry out the repairs, although it was local experts who actually did the repair work. Against the larger backdrop of the Solomon's Stables restoration, the incident over the wall repairs highlights the volatility of the issue and the sensitive nature of the entire area, pointing to the prospect of a long-drawn out conflict.<sup>26</sup> Here, it should be noted that projects to rebuild the (Second) Temple and effectively divide up the Haram al-Sharif by allocating time and/or space to Jewish prayers (as was done at al-Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron) have acquired widespread legitimacy in Israel. Such proposals are no longer confined to extremist movements: a large number of Knesset members and ministers from Israel's ruling parties now call for the implementation of such proposals.<sup>27</sup> The encroachment on the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery cannot be dissociated from a mindset that favors full Israeli control over all the walls of the Haram, first from the outside and moving incrementally to the inside of the compound.

## Background to the Current History

The first master plan for "modern" Jerusalem was drawn up in 1919 by the famous Scot, Patrick Geddes, under a commission from the British Mandate authorities and the Zionist movement. According to that plan, the Bab al-Rahmah and Mamilla cemeteries were to be converted into parks, including the whole of the Silwan area and the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, creating a green belt around the Old City. The only exceptions to this were the grounds of the planned-for Hebrew University—which Geddes viewed as an embodiment of Jewish identity and heritage in Jerusalem—and the Jewish tombs on the western flank of the Mount of Olives, which cover an area greater than that of all the Muslim cemeteries combined. The city's Muslim burial sites, viewed as having little significance, would be turned into green areas. Regarded as sacrosanct, Jewish graves may not be dug up, destroyed, or even opened. It is not unusual for a street to be diverted or a building prevented from being built on the mere suspicion that the site might harbor a Jewish grave, regardless of whether it dates to the Iron Age or the twenty-first century. By contrast, Muslim cemeteries are viewed as expendable, and have been steadily encroached on, demolished, and converted into parks.<sup>28</sup>

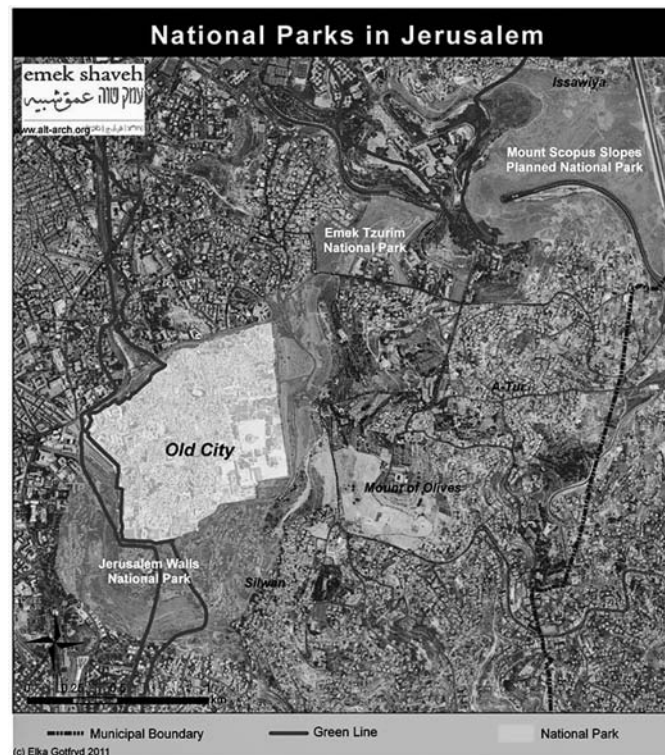


FIG 2. A map showing the Jerusalem Walls National Park. (*National Parks in Jerusalem*, 28 September 2016, Emek Shaveh, <https://alt-arch.org/en/national-parks-in-jerusalem/>)

All subsequent plans for Jerusalem have followed similar lines to the Geddes plan. In Israeli discourse, the Old City and the surrounding areas of East Jerusalem are referred to as the Holy Basin.<sup>29</sup> It is in that light that one must consider what has been taking place in Silwan from Wadi Qadroun (Kidron Valley) all the way to the western foothills of the Mount of Olives and parts of Sheikh Jarrah: the seizure of Palestinian properties purportedly in order to excavate for archaeological remains, the plan to demolish Silwan's Bustan neighborhood<sup>30</sup> in order to establish the so-called biblical "King's Garden," and the continuing encroachment on the Silwan Spring and Pool (a man-made water catchment pond). The accompanying map shows the planned extensions to the gardens, which include both the northern (Yusufiyya) and southern parts of the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery, most parts of Silwan, and the foothills of the Mount of Olives.

## Years of Harrassment and Encroachment

It was clear in what little regard the Jerusalem Municipality held the cemetery when it included Bab al-Rahmah in the plan known as the Jerusalem Walls National Park in 1974,<sup>31</sup> building the wide path that cuts through the cemetery from its most northerly to its most southerly point. The municipality planted shrubs on both sides of the pathway so that visitors would not see

the graves. The same attitude was evident when the Israeli authorities claimed before the High Court of Justice in 2007 that the cemetery had been designated an archaeological site and national park and that in the absence of any objections to this designation, burials in the cemetery could not proceed, since they would lead to the destruction of important archaeological remains.<sup>32</sup>

The southern part of the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery is known locally as the Silwani Graveyard, named after the village of Silwan that abuts it, and whose inhabitants habitually buried their dead there because of the cemetery's proximity to the village. Gravestones bearing the names of Silwan families are everywhere in this part of the cemetery, even though others belonging to a variety of Jerusalem families have been added in recent decades. Years of Israeli harassment culminated in the erection of a metal fence in May 2018 that cordons off the Silwan Graveyard from the rest of Bab al-Rahmah.<sup>33</sup> The previous December, the Committee for the Preservation of Islamic Cemeteries in Jerusalem, in partnership with the Hussein and Ansari families, successfully obtained an injunction from a magistrates court staying any work by INPA crews in the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery. The injunction was based on documents demonstrating that the cemetery, including the area in question, was registered as Islamic Waqf land in the *tabu*, the land register dating back to the Mandate (1920) and also in use under the Jordanian regime (1948–67). Additionally, some of the land was registered as private waqfs of the Hussein and Ansari families in the records of the shari'a court. When the INPA argued that the area had been designated a national park under the Jerusalem master plan, and its designation as an Islamic cemetery had been abrogated at the end of the 1990s, it was in contravention of Israeli law: under the law, any change in land use requires the notification of the owners, and neither the Islamic Waqf nor the Hussein and Ansari families were ever informed.

In May 2007, after Israeli police prevented Muslims from using the southeastern part of the cemetery, then-public security minister Avi Dichter said that the ban was being enforced because of the area's archaeological significance.<sup>34</sup> Earlier, police had refused to implement the ban, warning Dichter that expanding the so-called national park might lead to acts of violence. But this changed after an Israeli pressure group calling itself the Committee for the Prevention of the Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount successfully petitioned the High Court of Justice to ban Muslim burials in this part of the cemetery.<sup>35</sup> The pressure group, now renamed Temple Mount Antiquities Rescue Committee, is made up of and backed by prominent Israeli intellectuals, academics, and security experts.<sup>36</sup>

While the High Court's ruling rejected the suit on 21 July 2009, it "asserted that the authorities must enforce the law and protect the site from damage [burials]." The ruling specified that the police would assist the Jerusalem Municipality in the matter.<sup>37</sup> For its part, the INPA argued that it was already working on a plan to turn the site into a garden, that it had surveyed and filled in with soil an area of about two hundred square meters, closed several newly dug graves, and laid a screed of concrete to prevent burials. The project, to be designated a "public space and national park," would cover a total area of eighteen hundred square meters. Soon after the ruling the INPA went ahead with erecting a fence along the existing pathway, planting it with flowering shrubs and putting up a sign reading "National Park." The police agreed to provide full backup to the Jerusalem Municipality and to the INPA to stop any funerals or Muslim burial ceremonies being held in this part of the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery.<sup>38</sup>



FIG 3. A sign put up by the INPA, in partnership with the Jerusalem Municipality, indicating that the area is a national park where burials are banned. (Quds Press International News Agency, 29 August 2017, <http://qudspress.com/index.php?page=show&id=35456>)

As far as the cable car project and its impact on the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery, details of the scheme remain unclear. In May 2013, the Jerusalem Municipality announced that it would set up a joint team with the Jerusalem Development Authority and the Ministry of Transport to prepare plans for a 1.6-kilometer cable car project running from the Thawri district in the south of the Old City, along the Western Wall, and to the Mount of Olives. The line was reported to have a capacity of four thousand to six thousand passengers per hour.<sup>39</sup> On 13 December 2017, project manager Avigdor Yitzhaki convened a forum with statutory authority to approve major and urgent national infrastructure projects to greenlight the cable car project, an indication that the municipality and the Israeli government plan to proceed with the scheme.<sup>40</sup>

Stories and rumors surface periodically about some aspect of the project or another: for instance, that one of the pylons anchoring the track will be installed at the southern end of the cemetery, a few meters from the eastern wall of the Haram; or that one of the cable car's main stops will go up in the middle of the cemetery—close to Bab al-Asbat—rather than at its southern end, and that this will include the construction of a fifteen-thousand-square-meter, three-story station building. While no one idea seems to have gained traction yet, the plan has not gone into abeyance. All ideas are options under consideration, and the options are floated as trial balloons from time to time. Whichever is chosen ultimately, they are all further attempts to control the landscape and the narrative of the history of Jerusalem from above, after tunnels have been dug under and around the Old City to narrate its history from below.

## Afterword

The conflict goes on unabated. Grave owners, landowners, and the Islamic Waqf, as well as the city's residents continue to fight an almost daily battle for the future of Bab al-Rahmah. The struggle is not over a few hundred square meters of land in the cemetery, but rather over Jerusalem's very

identity and the city's cultural landscape. The conflict is a daily one, with various flashpoints in every part of the city: from Sheikh Jarrah to Silwan and Ras al-Amud, and from Khan al-Ahmar to Mamilla. Sometimes, it is Christian churches and their properties that are targeted; at others, it is areas adjacent to the Haram, like Omar ibn al-Khattab Square at Jaffa Gate or Ribat al-Kurd, and of course a constant struggle is going on inside the Haram al-Sharif compound itself.

While these disparate events may appear like a random tapestry, a common thread runs through them, namely the fate of Jerusalem. It is true that the Israeli occupation has notched up many successes, especially when it comes to seizing Palestinian land. It has managed to restrict the Palestinian presence in Jerusalem to an area of no more than ten square kilometers—a mere 13 percent of the entire area of East Jerusalem—confiscating or appropriating the remainder for settlements (including future ones that have yet to be built), as well as parks and roads. But in spite of all this, the occupation authorities have failed to win the battle for the Old City, where 90 percent of residents remain Palestinian, and the cultural landscape remains Arab. It has also failed to win the demographic battle, given that 40 percent of the inhabitants of Jerusalem (counting both the eastern and western part of the city) are Palestinians—something that remains beyond the control of Israeli planners, who have long wanted to see that figure drop below 20 percent.<sup>41</sup>

The battle for Jerusalem has also moved to the plane of the symbolic; the Old City is still Arab after fifty years of occupation, but Israeli flags fly everywhere, and the streets and lanes have turned into arenas from which to project Israel's presence and an exclusively Jewish heritage. This symbolic projection takes on a myriad of forms: staging the Festival of Light along the Ottoman walls of the city, holding open-air concerts in the Old City's "quaint" alleyways, U.S. president Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Argentina's cancellation of its friendly soccer match in Jerusalem following a global campaign of pressure by Palestine solidarity activists, and Israel's insistence on Jerusalem as the venue of the 2018 Eurovision song contest despite the fact that most European countries declined to attend.

The conflict over the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery is no different from these battles because it is primarily a question of control, of eroding the Palestinian presence in the city, and of amplifying ethno-nationalist symbolism in the hope that it will convince Israelis first, and then the rest of the world, that Jerusalem is an exclusively Israeli city.

#### About the Author

Nazmi Jubeh teaches at Birzeit University's Department of History and Archaeology. He is well-known for his expertise on Jerusalem, in general, and the holy sites, in particular.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Noble Sanctuary, in English, also known as the Temple Mount, and, confusingly, often referred to as al-Aqsa Mosque compound.
- 2 On control of the cultural landscape, see Nazmi Jubeh, "Al-Quds al-qadima wa muhituha: al-Inqilab 'ala al-mashhad al-thaqafi wa tahwiduhu" [Old Jerusalem and its surroundings: Inverting the cultural landscape and judaizing it], *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, no. 85 (Winter 2011): pp. 23–40.
- 3 Inside the Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery complex, which is an Islamic waqf, there is an area of several dunams with no graves.

- 4 On the Christian martyrs and their graves in the Mamilla Cemetery, see Gideon Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 C.E.)—An Archaeological Assessment," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, no. 357 (2010): pp. 35–48.
- 5 On Mamluk gravestones that are scattered around the cemetery and neglected, see Tewfiq Da'adli, "Mamluk Epitaphs from Mamilla Cemetery," *Levant* 43 (2011): pp. 78–97; and on the Kabakiya Dome, see Michael Hamilton Burgoyne, *Mamluk Jerusalem: An Architectural Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust on behalf of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 141–43.
- 6 Use of the cemetery was partially suspended by order of the Supreme Islamic Council in 1927 and in the same year it was declared a historic site, although some Jerusalem families continued to bury their dead there alongside other loved ones. The British Mandate authorities declared the cemetery an archaeological site in 1947.
- 7 Kamil al-'Asali, *Ajdaduna fi thara bayt al-maqdis* [Our ancestors in the soil of Jerusalem] (Amman: Mu'assasat Aal al-Bayt, 1981), pp. 117–32; Asem Khalidi, "The Mamilla Cemetery; A Buried History," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 37 (2014): pp. 104–9; Aya Hijazi, "Toward Spacio-cide: Building the Museum of Tolerance over the Mamilla Cemetery," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 67 (2016): pp. 97–109; see also "Maqbarat ma'manallah fil quds al-gharbiyya," Emek Shaveh Institute, 13 September 2013, <http://alt-arch.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/mamilla-ar.pdf>. An English translation titled "The Mamilla Cemetery in West Jerusalem: A Heritage Site at the Crossroads of Politics and Heritage" is available through the Emek Shaveh Institute, <https://alt-arch.org/en/mamilla/>.
- 8 Nasir-i Khusraw mentioned it in 1047: "At the border of this plain there is a great cemetery, where are many places of pious renown, whither men come to pray and offer up petitions in their need," from *A Diary of a Journey through Syria and Palestine*, trans. Guy Le Strange, vol. 3 (1888; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2018), p. 25.
- 9 On the Bab al-Sahira Cemetery, see al-'Asali, *Ajdaduna fi thara*, pp. 142–45.
- 10 It was the Mamluk commander, Qansuh al-Yahyawi, who developed and organized the cemetery in 1467 C.E.
- 11 One fanciful explanation for the name is that the Prophet Muhammad rode into Jerusalem through the Gate of Repentance and upon his ascent to the heavens, he went out through the Gate of Mercy. In Judaism and Christianity, Bab al-Rahmah is associated with stories about the return of the Messiah, the Day of Judgement, and Jesus going through the gate on Palm Sunday.
- 12 Some people associate the gate with the Qur'anic verse "A wall shall be erected between them in which there is a gate, with mercy on its outer side and torment on its inner side" (57:13).
- 13 These include Ibn al-Faqih, Ibn Abd Rabbih, the medieval geographer al-Maqdisi, and Nasir-i Khusraw.
- 14 'Izz al-Din Ibn Shaddad, "Al-a'laq al-khatira," in vol. 2 of Taissier Khalaf, *Mawsu'at rihlat al-'Arab wal-Muslimin ila Filistin* [Encyclopedia of the travels of Arabs and Muslims to Palestine] (Damascus: Dar Kanaan, 2009), p. 128.
- 15 Ibn Fadlallah al-'Umari, *Masalik al-absar*, vol. 1, (Damascus, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2010), pp. 203–4.
- 16 John of Würzburg, *Description of the Holy Land: Circa 1421 A.D.*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1890), p. 19.
- 17 Aubrey Stewart, trans., *Theoderich's Description of the Holy Places: Circa 1172 A.D.* (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1891), p. 24.
- 18 Rev. Canon Brownlow, trans., *Saewulf (Pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, 1102–1103 A.D.)* vol. 3, (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1892), p. 17.
- 19 Al-Nabulsi, "Al-haqiqa wal-majaz" [Truth and metaphor], in Kamil al-'Asali, *Bayt al-Maqdis fi kutub al-rihalat 'inda al-'Arab wal-Muslimin* [Jerusalem in the travel books of the Arabs and Muslims], (Amman: 1991), p. 280.
- 20 Nasir-i Khusraw, *A Diary of a Journey*, vol. 4, p. 32.

- 21 C. W. Wilson, *The Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel in the Holy Land, 1106–1107 A.D.*, (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1888), p. 31.
- 22 Al-Nabulsi, "al-Haqiqa," p. 280.
- 23 The joint Jordanian-Palestinian demands have been documented in reports submitted annually to the World Heritage Committee. They say there is an urgent need to repair the gatehouse. See, for example, "Update of the List of World Heritage in Danger (Retained Properties)," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Centre, 12 July 2017, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/6926>.<https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/6926>.
- 24 Yumna Patel and Saleh Zghari, "Palestinians on High Alert as Israel Prepares to Hand Over East Jerusalem Nature Reserve and Muslim Cemetery to Settlers," Mondoweiss, 12 July 2018, <https://mondoweiss.net/2018/07/palestinians-prepares-jerusalem/>.
- 25 Meron Benvenisti, *City of Stone* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 89; Simone Ricca, Heritage, Nationalism and the Shifting Symbolism of the Wailing Wall," in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, no. 151 (2010): pp. 169–88, <https://journals.openedition.org/assr/22401>.
- 26 The same problem is now evident in the western wall of the Haram, from which a large stone block became dislodged on 23 June 2018, in the area close to the southwestern corner, under the Islamic Museum building. The reason for this is not known but the fact that Israeli authorities have not allowed the Islamic Waqf to repair the wall and the continuing Israeli excavations below it have given rise to a host of problems. See Jeffrey Heller, "Boulder Falls from Jerusalem's Western Wall, Barely Missing Worshipper," Reuters, 23 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-wall/boulder-falls-from-jerusalems-western-wall-barely-missing-worshipper-idUSKBN1KD1NA>.
- 27 For these movements and their political influence, see Yizhar Be'er, "Dangerous Liaison: The Dynamics of the Rise of the Temple Movements and Their Implications," *Ir Amim*, 1 March 2013, <http://www.ir-amim.org.il/sites/default/files/Dangerous%20Liaison-Dynamics%20of%20the%20Temple%20Movements.pdf>.
- 28 On Geddes's unpublished report, in which he discusses the Jerusalem city plan (a copy of which is in the author's possession), see Noah Hysler Rubin, "Geography, Colonialism and Town Planning: Patrick Geddes' Plan for Mandatory Jerusalem," *Cultural Geographies* 18, no. 2 (2011): pp. 231–48.
- 29 Geddes referred to the possibility of removing the Harat al-Magharabi Quarter, which Israel did after occupying East Jerusalem in 1967, which he contemptuously referred to as "the Mughrabi village."
- 30 On the Bustan Quarter project as part of plans for the so-called King's Gardens, see "The Giant's Garden: The King's Garden Plan in al-Bustan," *Ir Amim*, May 2012, <http://www.ir-amim.org.il/sites/default/files/al-Bustan%20ENG.pdf>.
- 31 According to the Israeli human rights NGO, B'Tselem, the Jerusalem Walls Park spans "an area of roughly 110 hectares, more than half of it in East Jerusalem. The park encircles the Old City walls and includes extensive populated areas of the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan." See "Jerusalem Walls National Park," B'Tselem, 16 September 2014, [https://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/national\\_parks\\_jerusalem\\_walls](https://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/national_parks_jerusalem_walls).
- 32 Nadav Shragai, "Dichter Rules Area near Temple Mount Off-Limits to Muslim Burial," *Haaretz*, 29 May 2007, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4822820>.
- 33 For more details, see Amalya Dubrovsky, "Jerusalem Municipality Confiscates Historic Islamic Cemetery," Alternative Information Center on the Palestine/Israel Conflict and Middle East Politics, 30 May 2018, <https://aicnews.org/index.php/2018/05/30/jerusalem-municipality-confiscates-historic-islamic-cemetery/>.
- 34 Shragai, "Dichter Rules."
- 35 "Re: Reported Demolitions at Jerusalem's Bab Al-Rahma Cemetery," *Terrestrial Jerusalem*, 30 November 2016, <http://t-j.org.il/LatestDevelopments/tabid/1370/currentpage/1/articleID/815/Default.aspx>. For the text of the petition and the documents it included (in Hebrew), with an introduction in English, see "Petitions by the Committee to the High Court of Justice," Public

Committee against the Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount, 27 September 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130927163103/http://templemountdestruction.com/e/Aboutus/PetitionstotheHighCourtofJustice/tabid/182/Default.aspx>.

- 36 These include A. B. Yehoshua (novelist and playwright), S. Yizhar (writer and politician), Avi Ravitzky (academic), and Dan Shomron (former army chief of staff), archaeologists Ehud Netzer, Ronny Reich, Eilat Mazar (regarded as a right-wing extremist who favors settlement activity, especially in Silwan, and whose excavation work is financed by settler associations), Gabriel Barkay, and Ephraim Stern, as well as other prominent figures.
- 37 "Graveyard Metropolis East of Jerusalem's Old City," Emek Shaveh, 13 September 2013, [https://alt-arch.org/en/graveyard\\_metropolis/](https://alt-arch.org/en/graveyard_metropolis/).
- 38 "Graveyard Metropolis," Emek Shaveh, 13 September 2013.
- 39 "Plans Published for Old City Cable Car," Terrestrial Jerusalem, 7 May 2013, <http://t-j.org.il/LatestDevelopments/tabid/1370/currentpage/1/articleID/655/Default.aspx>.
- 40 "Disney-fication Proceeds: Jerusalem Cable Car and Footbridge," Terrestrial Jerusalem, 1 January 2018, <http://tj.org.il/LatestDevelopments/tabid/1370/currentpage/1/articleID/867/Default.aspx>.
- 41 For further information on Israeli attempts to shape the demographics of East Jerusalem, see B'Tselem, "East Jerusalem," 11 November 2017, <https://www.btselem.org/jerusalem>.