FORGOTTEN

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Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East

FORGOTTEN

Searching For Palestine's Hidden Places And Lost Memorials

RAJA SHEHADEH and
PENNY JOHNSON

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To Kamal Abdel-Fattah
(1943–2023)
Palestine's Geographer

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A Note to Our Readers

As a year of Israel's catastrophic, merciless assault on Gaza is accompanied by a horrific war in Lebanon, we return to our book and recall standing on a hill looking at the ancient route, Via Maris (the Way of the Sea), that took travellers from Damascus through Gaza to Egypt from the Bronze Age to the nineteenth century. Israel's blockade on Gaza since 2006 prevented us from travelling there, and now only Israeli tanks have free access as the almost unimaginable death toll of Gazans mounts to over 42,000, including, by conservative estimates, 11,000 children. Israeli hostages continue to languish – or die – in Gaza's tunnels when a ceasefire could have secured their release. Sadly, Israel's war on Gaza in its relentless destruction of its rich cultural heritage is not only a

war on Gaza's present but on its past. The loss is of a heritage for all humankind. We hope that our own explorations in this book of lost places and hidden memorials offers a glimmer of hope amid this darkness. As we continue to hear the plainsong ringing from the church so patiently restored by the former residents of the destroyed village of Kfar Bir'im, we find new meaning in the words on mosaic tiles nearby: 'Return is the Way.'

Ramallah, October, 2024


0 10 20 30 40 miles
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 kilometres
LEBANON
SYRIA
Mediterranean Sea
Ras Naqoura
Kfar Bir'im
Golan Heights **
Lake Tiberias
Haifa
Kfar Kanna
Nazereth
Mount Tabor
Musmus
Jenin
Nablus
Jordan
Tel Aviv
WEST BANK*
Manshiya/Jaffa
Ras Karkar
Ramallah
Auja
Amman
Qibya
Bir Nabala
Jib
Jericho
Qasr al Yahud
Latrun/Mini-Israel Park
Jerusalem
GAZA*
Gaza
Ein Gedi
Dead Sea
ISRAEL
JORDAN
N
* Occupied Palestinian Territory
** Occupied Syrian Territory
West Bank Israeli settlements
Israeli Settlements in the West Bank
WEST BANK*
ISRAEL
Jordan
Green Line
Dead Sea
Separation Wall

Introduction

A Small Stone on a Dusty Road

This book is a search for hidden or neglected memorials and places in historic Palestine, now Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and an investigation into what they might tell us about the land and the people who have lived, and are living, on our small slip of earth between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. What have they memorialised and what lies unseen and abandoned – and why? We grapple not only with questions of Israeli resistance to acknowledging the Nakba – the 1948 catastrophe for Palestinians – but also the complicated history of Palestinian commemoration in our own time. These are some of the questions we seek to answer in this book.

When the pandemic began, we joked that we were used to lockdowns and curfews, having lived in the Palestinian city of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank for so long, a lifetime in Raja's case and four decades in Penny's. After the 2002 Israeli military re-invasion of the West Bank, Ramallah was under Israeli military curfew for a whole month so we were, we thought, experienced.

However, as the pandemic months turned into years, our humour inevitably turned sour. In the late summer of 2021, we had been stuck in our Ramallah enclave for far too long. Even excursions outside Ramallah had become fraught with complications. Since the signing of the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation in 1993 and the subsequent 1995 Oslo Accords, the West Bank has been divided into three areas – A, B and C – with Area C, under sole Israeli control, constituting 60 per cent of the West Bank and home to ever-expanding Israeli settlements. These divisions were originally planned to last for a five-year interim period leading to a final peace agreement but they remain in force today. And 'Oslo,' as Palestinians call the whole period in shorthand, has now gone on for three decades with no end in sight.

Since the 2002 re-invasion, Israel has restricted Palestinian movement even more severely, both between the West Bank and Israel, and inside the West Bank itself, installing hundreds of checkpoints and road barriers. In the present tense (and tense it is), our Palestinian enclaves are becoming more and more like ghettos. For us, in this claustrophobic time, travel outside the country had been one of the ways to break our isolation, relishing walks in the Scottish Highlands without

any obstructions except for the weather. The pandemic put a stop to that.

Our search began accidentally in the summer of 2021 when we took a walk on an obscure path along the wall separating the West Bank from Israel. It was time to leave Ramallah, even for a day. We decided we must at least take a walk and that short walk started us on a much longer journey that took us on explorations of ancient and contemporary sites that helped us better understand what was taking place in our contested territory. With every visit to a new site, we encountered Israeli attempts to develop a new geography, and the picture of how this was happening became clearer to us. As we discovered, the confinement of Palestinians behind checkpoints is not only intended by Israeli planners and settlers to restrict movement but is also designed to alienate the new generations who have no memory or experience of historic Palestine, and thus are becoming strangers in the land.

With 144 (and counting) Israeli settlements and more than 100 of what Israelis call 'outposts' having been built in the West Bank since 1967, it has become harder to find safe areas to walk in our hills and valleys. One must choose paths carefully. That day, we began walking on an obscure, dusty road leading to Beit Nuba, an agricultural hamlet to the west of Ramallah just on 'our side' of the separation (apartheid) wall dividing us in the occupied West Bank from the state of Israel, a structure that Israel began constructing in June 2002 and is now 700 kilometres long. Our friend and companion, the photographer Bassam Almohor, drew our attention to a small, smooth, grey rock erected by the roadside, which he photographed. A Palestinian flag, its colours still bright, along with an image of an AK-47 gun

attached to its flagpole, was painted on the left-hand side. The inscription honours the three 'martyrs of the Egyptian Arab Army who were martyred in the battle for Latroun, 1967'.

This memorial stone held a story we did not know. What were three Egyptians doing fighting in Latroun in the June 1967 war – that brief war, with its lasting consequences, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Eastern Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip as well as the Golan Heights? That the Egyptian army fought (and lost) in the Sinai, in brutal battles with great loss of life is well known – but what happened in Latroun in the centre of the country?

This simple plaque set us off on a journey across historic Palestine, with the sad exception of the Gaza Strip, to which we had no access. We were looking for, and reflecting on, lost, forgotten and hidden memorials, monuments and places, some infused with our personal memories, others from a millennium ago or more. We were curious to discover what was memorialised and what was left unmarked or erased from the landscape of Palestine. What began as short excursions to relieve our sense of confinement developed into an exploration of many lost places and forgotten memorials, raising deeper questions on wider issues relating to the current reality in the small area of the world where we live.

At a time when contested memorials make global headlines – a statue of arch-colonialist Cecil Rhodes was toppled at the University of Cape Town while a statue of Rhodes still stands at Oxford University, despite growing protests – we decided to explore our world, whether the ruins of the past or more recent memorials to events that have faded even from our own intimate recollections.

A memorial stone for three Egyptian soldiers who perished in the 1967 war, on the side of a deserted road near the wall separating the West Bank from Israel.

We began in the first days of 2022, emerging from the lost pandemic years to a Palestine that was both familiar and newly strange. We emerged conscious of our years, feeling older and more vulnerable, and with a haunting sense of time and mortality. 'Old men should be explorers,' T. S. Eliot wrote, and (aside from replacing 'men' with 'people') we heartily agree. There was much to retrieve and to learn about the forgotten or half-forgotten memorials of those fallen in our many wars and conflicts, the disappearing or hidden places we only half-know, and that younger generations may not know at all, and the events that are partly lost to memory but can tell us about ourselves and our possible futures. This was not an exercise in nostalgia but a search for a usable past that might take us beyond our fragmented land and occupied lives; always hoping for evidence of the common past in the land that we and our adversary share unequally.

The stories we found were interwoven with our own. Sometimes we chose places and memorials, sometimes they seemed to choose us, as the voices of those lost in war, conflict and, even more painfully, massacres, whispered in our ears. We were especially curious to investigate whether and how the 1948–49 Nakba ('catastrophe' in Arabic), that war that erased Palestine and which Israel is yet to recognise, was commemorated among Palestinians in Israel.

Both Palestine's ancient and recent past also accompanied our contemporary wanderings, from Bronze Age ruins of a once-great city at Tell Balata near the city of Nablus (chapter 1) to a haunted mosque in western Jerusalem that only one hundred years ago welcomed worshippers to the shrine and tomb of a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (chapter 5).

There is no place where archaeology is more politicised than in Israel. In a nearby Palestinian village that has become the name of a major Israeli checkpoint, we stared into the dark ruins of a sophisticated Bronze Age system of water retrieval and examined a more 'recent' building that had been a Byzantine church then mosque then Crusader church (chapter 2): the ruins of Palestine move through the ages. In our own city of Ramallah, we discovered ruins from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine era and wondered at what we did not see in our surroundings (chapter 13).

Our visits also included areas that demonstrate Israel's persistent attempts to bury the Palestinian presence on the land pre-1948, its adamant refusal to recognise the Nakba, and its continuous attempt to create a new geography, such as in the eradication of Manshiya, the once lively quarter of the Palestinian city of Jaffa near the Mediterranean Sea, which has been obliterated, its ruins concealed by a seaside park (chapter 8).

The loss of our own freedom of movement drew us to the connections Palestine once had with the world around it. At the ruins of Khan al Tujjar (chapter 4), a once major site in the Galilee where caravans from Syria and beyond rested on their travels to the Palestinian coast and on to Cairo, we stepped through weeds and waist-high thorns to discover its neglected ruins, with only a small sign in Hebrew to mark this spot.

And as our explorations drew to a close, we would return to that small grey stone on that dusty road as Israeli newspapers reported startling revelations from a story that had been suppressed for half a century. We later visited the long-hidden burial site of other Egyptian soldiers and discovered what it has become.

There is never just one story to the memorials and places we explore. The very existence of Palestine is replete with contestation and denial. On the way to Jericho, at a place dedicated to the Good Samaritan, the Israeli Civil Administration – the arm of the Israeli occupation that controls our lives and also controls archaeological sites – the small Museum of the Good Samaritan displays beautiful mosaics. Most have been taken from the territories occupied in the June war in 1967, some from the Gaza Strip, some from Hebron and other sites in the West Bank. They are displayed without context. What we can perhaps hope for is that our journeys in this book provide pathways to understanding that speak to the diverse groups who have lived, and are living, in our common world.

PART ONE

Palestine's Pasts, Our Past and A Troubled Present

I am against boys becoming
heroes at ten …
And yet …
Rashid Hussein, 'Opposition'

1

Memorials of the Fallen, Ruins of a Great City: Nablus

We had not been to Nablus, only thirty-five kilometres from Ramallah, for more than two years. Perhaps no city in the occupied West Bank has more layers of history – whether forgotten, half-remembered or memorialised – than the ancient city of Nablus. This bustling hub of merchants and manufacturers has a chronicle of habitation that stretches back to the Bronze Age, 5,000 years ago. Compared to Nablus, Ramallah is a parvenu city (some would say a village), founded in its present incarnation only in the mid-sixteenth century

by the Christian Haddad family fleeing a feud in Transjordan. In contrast, Nablus bears the weight of its many pasts: as a Roman city, an Islamic city, a Crusader conquest, and a trading and commercial centre for the Levant under the Ottoman Empire. Within our comparatively brief lifetime, Nablus has remained attractive for its vital Old City, its soap factories and its small industries. It also has a well-deserved reputation as a centre of resistance to the Israeli occupation. On our last visit in 2019, we sat in a Nablus public garden on a moonlit night, listening to international and local writers in a session of the Palestine Festival of Literature. We did not know then that this treasured festival would not make its annual appearance during the pandemic years or that we would be absent for so long.

As we travelled along the congested Highway 60, we were flooded with memories of the old road to Nablus, winding through near pristine hills and agricultural landscapes that have almost vanished as sprawling Israeli settlements have been greatly expanded, and new settlements founded. Were we simply succumbing to that common affliction of an older generation – nostalgia for past times and a better world? No, it was not just that, as we quickly found out when we approached the Palestinian town of Hawara near the entrance to Nablus. The drastic transformation of the landscape was still occurring all around us in the present tense and with profound implications for the future. On both sides of Hawara, Israeli bulldozers were at work gouging out the hills in a massive project to construct a four-lane bypass road over the town – the Hawara Bypass – connecting Israeli settlements from the west to the east.

Building bypass roads and tunnels for Israeli settlers and confiscating Palestinian land is the continuing story of the development of Highway 60. Perhaps most notorious is the 'tunnel road' section near Bethlehem and Beit Jala in the southern West Bank, a four-lane 'underpass' built on confiscated Palestinian land where the same Palestinians landowners, carrying West Bank identity cards, are forbidden to drive. Highway 60 is called by some Israelis 'the way of the patriarchs', and it makes apartheid visible as it destroys the land and hills we once knew.

Since our visit, Hawara residents had endured a pogrom – the term used by the Israeli army commander of the area – when, on 23 February 2023, some 400 settlers, mainly from the nearby Israeli settlement of Har Bracha (Hebrew for 'hill of blessing'), went on a five-hour, late-night rampage of revenge for two settlers shot and killed by Palestinian militants. The settlers were not stopped by the Israeli army or police. One Palestinian was killed and some 100 Hawara residents were injured, including four who were left in a serious condition. At least fifteen houses were burned, one with the family still inside.

Given what we saw on our drive through the town, we could perhaps have anticipated these bitter events, but, as we passed the Israeli settlement of Elon Moreh, we were reminded of a more hopeful period, in 1978. At that time, Raja, just back from his law studies in the UK and working with colleagues on the founding of the first Palestinian human rights organisation, Al Haq (then Law in the Service of Man), was assiduously following the progress of the Elon Moreh case at the Israeli High Court, where Palestinians were petitioning

the court to rule on the legality of the Israeli government's acquiring of privately owned Palestinian land through requisition for military purposes. In this case, the High Court's ruling in favour of the Palestinians merely caused the government to change tactics, adopting a method whereby lands they wanted for settlement were first declared to be state land. The success of the case provided only short-lived hope, as the sprawling Elon Moreh settlement attests.

So it is no wonder that we strive to remember how it once was, not so long ago – not that it was untroubled even then. During the first Palestinian intifada, Raja recalled accompanying Noam Chomsky on a visit to Beita, an embattled Palestinian village. It was early April 1988 and the hills were awash with spring flowers. Chomsky was there to speak to the villagers about a terrible incident that had just taken place, when Jewish teenagers from the same Elon Moreh settlement, hiking in a nearby valley, were confronted by Palestinians from Beita throwing stones, ubiquitous in Palestine, to protect their village. A settler had been injured by gunfire and Palestinians were blamed. It later emerged that the bullet had been fired by one of the men guarding the settlers. But that was after the army had invaded the village, dynamited fourteen houses, killed a farmer and a sixteen-year-old boy, and arrested all the males of the village, deporting several to Lebanon. Chomsky listened attentively and was saddened but not surprised. He had anticipated that the increased rate of settlement building would place the occupier and the occupied, the land confiscators and those who had lost their land, physically close together, with predictable results.

To lighten the mood, Raja had suggested that Noam look

up to the beauty of the hills after the winter rain, but to no avail. Chomsky, a man of words, could not really see the natural world. The spring loveliness passed him by entirely. At that time, walking in the hills was our escape from the human miseries of occupation. How many human lives and how many futures would have been preserved – along with the natural world – had the Israeli government properly assessed the Elon Moreh case and prevented further settlements. Thousands have died since, and so here we were, on our way to see how Palestinians memorialise their dead in Nablus.

We stood silently before our first memorial in Nablus's Old City, mesmerised. It was a triptych, eerily recalling the three-panelled paintings that graced altars in Byzantine or Renaissance churches. Those religious works, with their striking figures in luminous colours on a shining gold background, often portrayed the martyrs of the church and their suffering for Christ. In Nablus's Old City, on a March day in 2022, we stood looking at three posters featuring black and white photographs of the martyrs of Nablus, those who had suffered for their city and their people. This altar was simply a wall of white stone bricks with a neat black fence protecting it. Printed over the posters was a Quranic verse, the *surat l-ahzab*. An English translation is:

> Among the believers are men who were true to their covenant with God; some of them have fulfilled their vow by death, and some are still awaiting, and they have not changed in the least.

This contemporary altar was in the Aryon quarter of the

Old City. We had wended our way through the packed narrow streets, redolent with smells of sweets and spices and the sound of merchants calling out their wares. Although Bassam Almohor, our companion and photographer, knew the way and guided us, it had been a long time since we were in a crowd and we both felt somewhat dazed and weary. Even our stop for a slice of Nablus *kanafeh* – a delicacy of spun pastry and white cheese soaked in a sweet syrup – was not restorative, as we stood, elbow to elbow, eating the delicious treat in an alley packed with Nabulsi consumers.

The Aryon quarter was quieter, and its centre, Sahet al Tut (Mulberry Square) was even more peaceful. Only a boy playing with a rambunctious puppy broke the silence. This had not been the case, however, in April 2002 during Israel's re-invasion of Palestinian towns during the second intifada. The Old City of Nablus was a particular target: both Palestinian militants and civilians perished during a ten-day curfew, and homes and historic buildings, including a Byzantine basilica and an Ottoman-era palace, were demolished or damaged. The Aryon quarter was not spared: an Israeli tank had ploughed through the Shuabi family home, killing six family members. We turned and looked at the house where it had happened, opposite the triptych. The plaque listed the names of those murdered there with the sombre message 'Never forgive, never forget'. For us, not forgetting was key to our exploration, but what to make of the memories was a question we had not yet answered.

Turning back to our Nablus altar, we contemplated the three panels. The first consisted of five photographs: four young men, perhaps in their late teens, and, at the bottom,

A triptych of posters memorialising young men – martyrs – who perished during the first and second Palestinian intifadas and in the present years, Old City of Nablus.

one who could only be described as a boy. 'So young, and look at their clothes and their hairstyles,' Penny said. 'These must be from the first intifada.' And then she added, softly, 'They are the only martyrs not bearing arms.' Raja ruefully recalled an observation by the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti: 'Living people grow old, but martyrs grow younger.'

Neither of us was as young as these five when the intifada erupted in December 1987 but the events of those years weave in and out of our memories as a time that shaped us and gave us hope for the future. It was a time of mass participation: with hundreds of other women, Penny, somewhat fearful but clutching a friend's arm, marched several times through Ramallah's occupied city. At the temporary headquarters in Ramallah of shuttered Birzeit University, she wrote statements and assisted in the planning and holding of an international conference in Jerusalem on 'Twenty Years of Occupation'. At Al Haq, Raja worked with colleagues to document human rights violations and to hold another notable conference in Jerusalem, bringing together international and local scholars to discuss international law and the administration of occupied territories. Both of these gatherings looked towards a future of Palestinian independence: surely the mass civil resistance to twenty years of occupation heralded an end to the suffering of a people? Three decades later, we look at the poster of these young people who sacrificed their lives for that independence and still cannot see an end.

Two older men were sitting in the sun on a bench under the triptych, their backs supported by the wall. They were smoking nergila, the fragrant water-pipe highly favoured by Nabulsis, and silently regarding us, wondering what we were

up to. They kept their thoughts to themselves, looking as though they had seen it all and nothing now could possibly disturb them. Although we were loath to intrude on their peace we asked them if the central image on the wall was indeed from the second intifada. 'Yes,' one of them said, with a resigned tone of voice, pointing to it. 'That is from the second intifada.'

It is perhaps telling that this image of the second intifada foregrounds not those many ordinary young men who perished in the violence, but, in the words of the poster, the 'leader'. Muhammed Yusef Zakarneh, is holding a rifle against his chest, the gun almost bigger than he is. He is flanked by the faces of two older men, perhaps his own leaders. The Dome of the Rock gleams in the background. The preponderance of both rifles and religious iconography distinguishes the posters of the second intifada.

Some disturbing memories of that period still haunt us. It is impossible to forget the spring of 2002. That March, Israeli civilians perished in a series of nine Palestinian suicide bombings, acts of desperation by young Palestinian men and women who knew only occupation. Then, on 29 March, we huddled at home while Israeli tanks rolled into Ramallah and other Palestinian towns in a massive incursion that wreaked havoc in our city, and our life, destroying so many livelihoods and hopes. Hundreds of Palestinians lost their lives. Raja wrote of our experience during the siege in his book, *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing*.

Our role in this disastrous second intifada, with its armed resistance – better described as rudimentary militias facing one of the most powerful armies in the world – was

strikingly different to the first. Indeed, it was hardly a role: we were simply civilians whose only mission was to watch the horrors taking place and survive as best we could. Remembering earlier mass civilian protests, Penny wrote a piece with a colleague from the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University with the title: 'Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone?'

The third image of the triptych, although closer to us in time, seemed more distant from our lives and experiences, telling us, again, something about the course of resistance in Palestine in these most recent, and complicated, years. We did not know the names of the young men pictured; we did not know when and how they had perished. As we walked through the quarter, we found more posters of martyrs placed on the stone walls. Our thoughts returned to the chilling words that end the Quranic inscription: 'some are still awaiting'.

And indeed, some await and death comes to them. A week after our visit, on 15 March, as we were writing up our experiences in Nablus, Israeli soldiers shot and killed sixteen-year-old Nader Haithem Rayan, during a dawn raid on the Balata refugee camp in Nablus, the most populous refugee camp in the West Bank and home to about 33,000 Palestinians who lost their original homes in Jaffa and its surrounding villages in 1948. The same day, a young man in Qalandia refugee camp near Ramallah perished by army fire, as did twenty-seven-year-old Sanad Al Harbed, a father of four children, during an Israeli army dawn raid in Rafat in the Naqab desert. And so many more since that time, as young militants from the city and surrounding refugee camps increasingly confront the Israeli army not with stones but with firearms.

But that day in Nablus, we could not bear considering future roll calls of the fallen. Instead, we turned to the past, the war dead from an older conflict. Near an abandoned soccer field and a technical school, at the outskirts of the city, the Iraqi soldiers who perished in 1948 – our Nakba – rest in orderly rows of tombstones. A plinth under the cypress trees reads 'Memorial to the martyrs of the Iraqi army'. There are several hundred graves, a minority with the names of the fallen, while most simply read 'martyr' and the date of death. All have the *fatiha*, the opening verse of the Quran, at their head and all are dated after 15 May 1948, when the new state of Israel was declared and Arab armies entered Palestine.

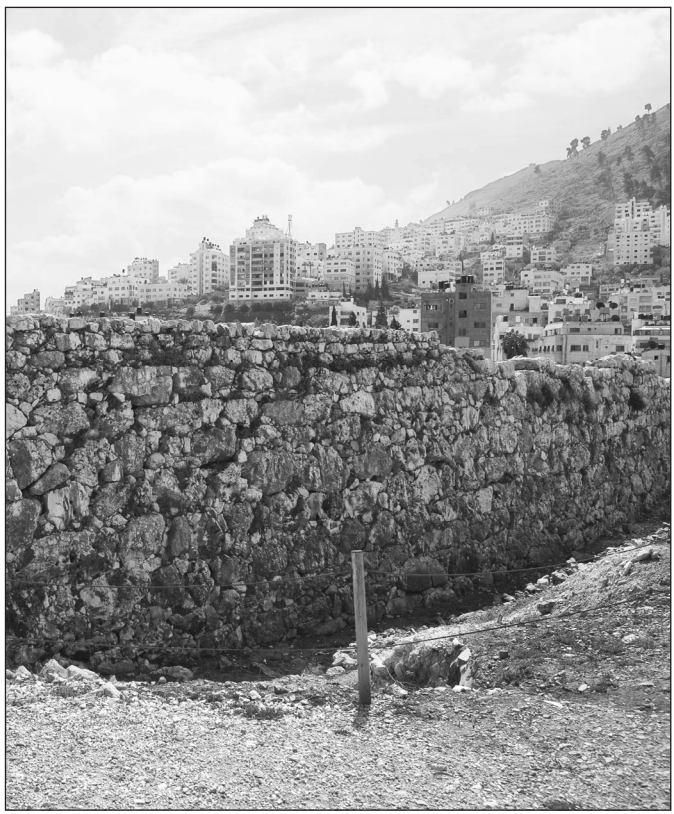
In Nablus, the Iraqi Expeditionary Force took over from Jordan's Arab Legion (commanded by the British officer Glubb Pasha) on 22 May and Nablus became the Iraqi headquarters. They successfully repulsed an Israeli attack on Jenin in June (there is an Iraqi war cemetery there as well), but in the months to come the Force did not go on the offensive. Indeed, as historian Charles Tripp has noted, this period was characterised by embittered soldiers by the phrase *Maku awamir* (no orders). Walking along the sombre rows of graves, we found that most of the fallen died in June and July 1948, simply, it seems, to preserve the Iraqi positions; forgotten soldiers in an obscure corner of the war that changed Palestinian lives so drastically. Intriguingly, there is one grave of a martyr from Palestine itself, dated February 1949. The Iraqi government would sign an armistice agreement with Israel a month later. What would the status of this forgotten cemetery have been had the fighting of these men succeeded in changing the course of the war?

These young men were not the only soldiers who had been forgotten. On a busy Nablus intersection, hidden by several straggly palm trees and a stone wall, we found a memorial to Jordanian soldiers who fell in Nablus during a later war: the 1967 war that marked the beginning of the dismal period in our life that began with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. An elevated grave stood in a patch of weeds, the resting place of a Jordanian commander and three of his comrades who fell in the battle of Wadi al Touffah (the Valley of Apples) near Nablus. A nondescript stone plaque from the Nablus municipality commemorated this small enclave, which seemed largely unvisited, although the municipality did hold a small commemorative event in 2020. On a nearby busy traffic circle, a faceless soldier had been painted in black paint, flanked by Jordanian and Palestinian flags.

We could wander among the dead no longer and found our way to a site that whispered not of the loss of young men, but of lost civilisations. Tell Balata, once the site of a flourishing Middle Bronze Age city, was where we would end our visit to Nablus.

We entered the Tell Balata Archaeological Park through a side entrance after parking near the orchards of contemporary Balata, once a village, now incorporated as a suburb of Nablus, with the inevitable concrete tower blocks rising above its orchards. In Palestine, names can continue for thousands of years while human populations flow through their sites.

There was a sign for visitors with entrance fees to the park, but there was no one at the booth – and indeed no one in sight. We walked along an inviting path, with red anemones growing near a stone wall that a sign identified as the imperial fortress,



The remains of the wall surrounding the great Bronze Age city of Tell Balata with the town of Balata in the background, near Nablus.

all that was left of what was once an imposing structure. At another entrance, we finally found a pleasant young man who provided us with tickets.

We wandered along paths marked by the occasional sign, and an arrow directing visitors to sites while urging them

to keep away from fragile ruins. It was eerie being the only people at this important place and there was a feeling as of a half-finished project. Archaeologists from the Palestinian Authority and the University of Leiden, with support from the Netherlands and UNESCO, worked for four years (2010–14) to develop the site and make it legible to visitors – but, as is all too common in Palestine, work must have halted when international funding was exhausted. Reliance on international donors in the years since the Oslo Accords has extended from the Palestinian Authority to universities and non-governmental organisations to time-bound initiatives like the Tell Balata project.

Back at the entrance, the young man told us there was a staff member who could play a film about Tell Balata. When a young woman flicked a switch, we sat in the darkened room among empty chairs and watched a well-constructed, indeed slick, film that conveyed the past grandeur of the ancient city and the present achievements of its (partial) restoration. Tell Balata, the narrator said in a deep voice, is the 'lost queen of Palestine'. On the spring day of our visit, the stone ruins of the lost queen shone in the spring sunlight but we were the only witnesses.

As we left Nablus, Bassam pointed out another gouged hill that had escaped our notice. 'A new bus station for settlers,' he said grimly. There is a new imperium being built near Nablus. The stones of Tell Balata whisper of the fate of other imperiums and we hold on to our memories of the living but fragile anemones emerging from the cracks in that ancient wall.

2

Not Just a Checkpoint: Jib and Bir Nabala

A pleasant breeze from the Mediterranean Sea cooled us on a late afternoon in May as we stood on a hill surrounded by excavations of a Bronze and Iron Age city. The hill sits at the top of the contemporary Palestinian village of Jib, thirteen kilometres southwest of Ramallah and ten kilometres north of Jerusalem. The site has been identified by archaeologists as ancient Gibeon, where, according to biblical accounts, Joshua made the sun stand still; it was first inhabited some 5,000 years ago. Gibeon and Jib are close in name but the Palestinian village that inherited this whisper of glory and a long history of habitation, has become, in today's common

parlance, synonymous with the name of an infamous checkpoint that leaves the West Bank and its Palestinian communities on both sides of the divide. Across the way and beyond that checkpoint, we could see the Israeli settlement of East Givon. We had come to this impressive archaeological site not only to wonder at the evidence of its long past, but also to understand the plight of the beleaguered Palestinian villagers living nearby.

'Shall we go through Jib or the DCO?' is a frequent query these days for those driving back from Jerusalem to Ramallah. The 'choice' is between two checkpoints: a third possibility, the nearer Qalandia checkpoint, is automatically ruled out as being too miserable and congested. The DCO – the District Coordinating Office of the Israeli Civil Administration – graces the eastern entrance to Ramallah. Its checkpoint is usually unmanned but the winding road is often crowded with traffic on route to both the nearby Beit El settlement and to our town. Jib, on the western side, is a checkpoint with a set of rules for entrances and exits. Although the exit from Jib also leads to other parts of the occupied West Bank, the checkpoint marks a new boundary between Palestinian towns and villages and Israeli settlements. On the settlement side, the highway is open to Jerusalem and the coast but is forbidden to Palestinians holding Palestinian (West Bank) identity cards. Palestinian labourers with permits to work in Israel may use the checkpoint, but only on foot. VIPs from international organisations and prominent Palestinian businesspeople often have permits to pass, and residents of a Jib neighbourhood with agricultural land on the other side may sometimes pass. For the rest, exit from Jib is forbidden, while entrance to Jib

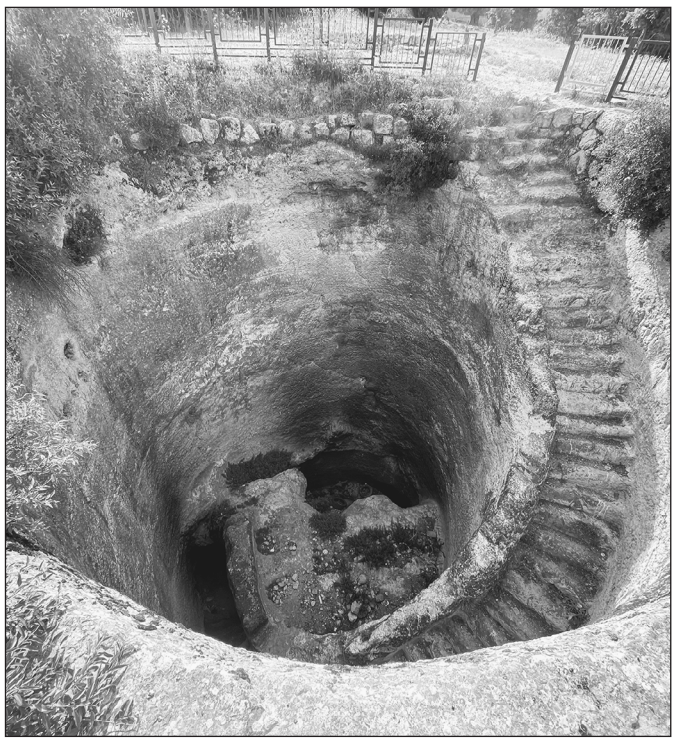
through the checkpoint is permitted for Palestinians with Jerusalem residency. All in all, it is dizzyingly complicated.

As we surveyed this new 'border point' from our hillside vantage point, we remembered how in the past we were able to make our voices heard by challenging those staffing the checkpoints. It was sometimes possible to address the reserve soldiers on duty and alert them to the folly and tragedy of what they were being made to do in obstructing movement for the Palestinians. Now, with the checkpoint staffed by Israeli military border police and private security staff, that limited interaction has become impossible.

We wearily exited the checkpoint and entered 'our side', encountering a scattering of village houses and shops along the main road, mostly catering to commuters. Some have borrowed names from grander establishments – one of them is called Zara – and others beckon drivers with Italian pizzas. In the distance we could see agricultural fields with a reputation for the tastiest Armenian cucumbers, long and slender, crisp and sweet, and in fact not cucumbers at all but a kind of musk melon. The road is always noisy, with the barking of an ever-present number of stray dogs and the nerve-wracking screeching of trucks and transit vans.

Al-Jib is a Palestinian village with a population of around 4,500 and an ancient past that we wanted to understand. We had been fortunate to visit the archaeological ruins on the hill above the current village ten years ago (everything seems to be a decade away now) with Nazmi Jubeh, a professor of history at Birzeit University and a co-founder of Riwaq, the Ramallah-based Centre for Architectural Conservation.

'Jib,' Nazmi had told us, pointing to its Bronze Age water



Steps leading to the sophisticated water system – and wine storage area – of a Bronze and Iron Age city on the hill above the village of Jib.

system, 'was once a more important city than Jerusalem.' As we stretched our minds back to the Bronze and Iron Ages, Nazmi took us through the sophisticated water system and, for those with other thirsts, the large-scale storage and export of wine in the Iron Age. That attractive version of the city existed in the most cosmopolitan periods of its more than 3,000-year history. Given the waves of invasion and destruction suffered by other cities in the Near East in this period, the observation by American archaeologist James Pritchard that 'the Gibeonites managed to live in peace for a good portion of their long history' could perhaps provide us with a lens through which to contemplate – and perhaps disrupt – the choking reality of the present.

Once upon a time, the village of Jib had struck travellers as a special place. Pritchard tells us that a British traveller, Edward Robinson, visited 'el-Jib and its rocky eminence' on 5 May 1838. Perhaps partly because he had come to Jib after a difficult night camped on the eastern slopes of the central highlands of the West Bank, where he had been plagued by fleas, barking dogs and mosquitos, on seeing the 'beautiful' fertile plain below this village on a hill he wrote:

> The hill may be said to stand in the midst of a basin, composed of broad valleys or plains, cultivated and full of grain, vineyards, and orchards of olive and fig trees. It was decidedly the finest part of Palestine that I had yet seen.

Like many western travellers of that era and beyond, with the Bible as their guide, Robinson was convinced that Jib was

ancient Gibeon. And indeed this was the conclusion from the excavations we were now viewing, conducted by Pritchard, his colleagues and around one hundred villagers over three summers (1956–59). Pritchard was not free of orientalist bias when he described Jib in the 1950s as a 'self-contained island of the past, where Arabs live today much as they did in the Middle Ages'. (One wonders how this fits with his observation of the daily bus to Jerusalem and the 'ubiquitous gasoline stove'.) Still, we were keen to know, whether Gibeon or Jib, that an ancient city had once stood here.

The hill with its ruins was still beautiful. Several families and a courting couple from the village sat peacefully under the olive trees, one of them so aged that we gazed at it in delight before we turned and peered down ancient steps to the rock-hewn caves far below, where water was once brought from a spring in the valley. A 3,000-year-old intricate water system was enough of a marvel but we also enjoyed the wine vats that could store about 115,000 litres at a time. Water and wine amid rich agricultural lands: no wonder Jib/Gibeon flourished. Bassam descended the steps into the water system to snap even more photos.

These excavations were remarkable, but, as we walked along a path on the eastern side of the hill, we confronted evidence of another kind of archaeology with a less elevated purpose. In August 2007, a team from a Palestinian NGO working on cultural preservation visited a ruin near Jib and found a young Israeli archaeologist, working under the aegis of Israel's Civil Administration Department of Archaeology ('civil' being a misnomer here as the Administration is under military control), who said he was engaged in 'salvage

archaeology' in preparation for the construction of the wall that would separate Jib from the Israeli settlements to the west. We saw several ancient olive presses uncovered in this (illegal) excavation, but all other objects have vanished.

We sat on a stone terrace, looking down on the wide expanse of planted fields in the valley to our east, a symphony of green. The valley is bordered to the east by the wall, separating it from other Jerusalem Palestinian neighbourhoods. Significantly, these lands of Jib and Bir Nabala are classified as Area C, thus permanent buildings are forbidden and only small temporary structures dot the landscape. To the south we could see another section of the wall, snaking under a large mosque called Nabi Samuel, the purported burial place of the Prophet Samuel, which sits on a high peak and dominates the Jerusalem skyline. Israel planned the wall so that the mosque would be left on what can only be described as the 'settlement side' of the West Bank. Hidden from our view – and indeed invisible from any ground angle – is the adjacent Palestinian community of Nebi Samwil, whose residents exist in a shifting regime of permits and restrictions. These unfortunate people have the double burden of their village and its lands being declared Area C while also residing in an Israeli-imposed 'national park' that now surrounds the mosque and tomb. Down below, a sizeable portion of the land of Jib also lies to the west of the checkpoint.

We could also see the flourishing settlements of Givon (Givon HaHadasha or New Givon) and East Givon (Givon Camp) and make out the skyline of the large settlement of Givat Zeev to the west. The three settlements are situated along a highway connected to Jerusalem that also descends to

the coast, an alternative route to the older, once quite narrow, road called Bab al Wad, which was the sole road to Jerusalem from the coast before 1967 and which was difficult for Zionist/Israeli forces to secure during the fighting in 1948. A new geography has been created with the wall, and the web of new roads built to connect Israeli settlements with Jerusalem, but this severs Palestinian villages west of Jib from Palestinian communities east of the wall, and Jib and Bir Nabala from any of their Jerusalem neighbours.

Both of us could remember, in the early 1980s, when Givat Zeev, the first of these settlements, did not exist – instead a wetland had flourished there. Was it simply nostalgia to recall now the struggle of Al Haq and its staff and volunteers to block the building of this illegal settlement on Palestinian land? We sincerely believed then that it would be possible. We smiled briefly as we remembered our friend and colleague, historian Roger Heacock, sitting in front of an Israeli bulldozer and being lifted in the air by the same before being unceremoniously dumped to the side. At the time we did not understand why Israel was struggling so relentlessly to create this new geography. Now it was all laid out before us.

We shook ourselves as we arose, not from the fragrant bits of thyme that clung to our clothes but from the cruel intricacies of plans over decades that had destroyed Palestinian lives and livelihoods. We wanted to end our visit on a more pleasant note and continued along the ridge of the hill to Jib's Old City, the historic core of the village, now uninhabited but carefully renovated by Riwaq in 2017, with the hope of the site becoming a centre for community activities.

At the entrance, a standing stone arch marked a building

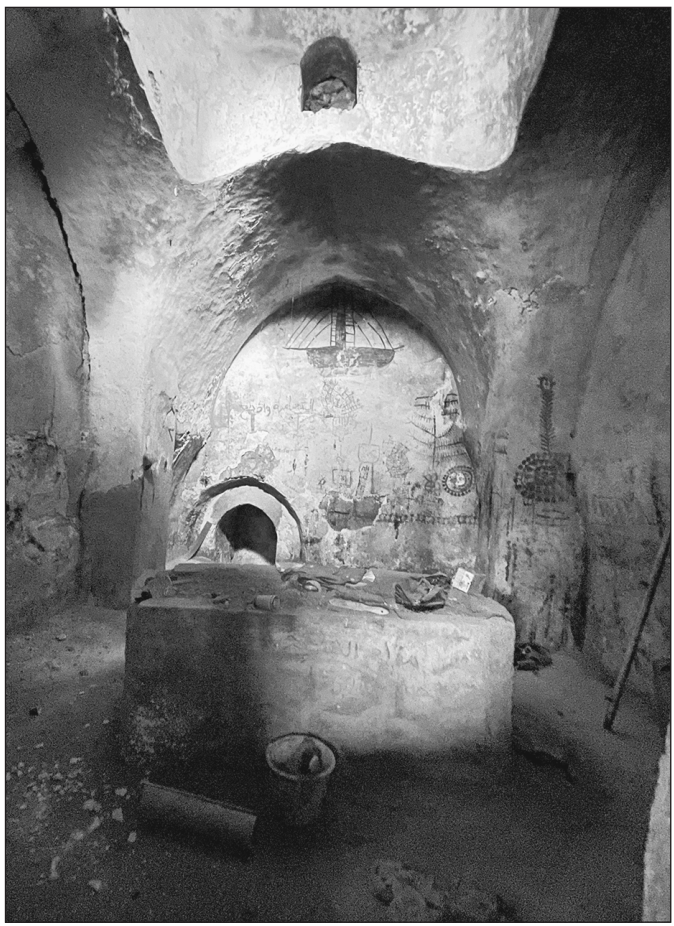
with multiple reconstructions, Byzantine, Umayyad and Crusader, giving a sense of the city's long past. We walked on and saw that a number of the low stone houses from Ottoman and Mandate times had been restored. A few dangling signs indicated plans, at least, for community centres and activities for children, but the buildings themselves were deserted.

At the edge of the village, we found a *maqam*, a sheikh or saint's tomb, a domed structure with its interior peaceful and clean. On the wall, there was a mysterious small painting in blue of a sailing ship. When we emerged, boys suddenly appeared – as they often do – shouting cheerfully at each other. We asked them the name of the sheikh and they responded in a chorus: 'Sheikh Hamid.' We should not have doubted their nine-year-old wisdom but we later checked with Nazmi Jubeh and indeed it was the tomb of Sheikh Hamid, whose body, according to legend, flew to Jib upon his death. But now it was these boys who were flying, springing from roof to roof with joyful energy. And then – parcour! – a thin boy leapt off a high roof and tower and another jumped from the roof of the *maqam*.

We descended the hill thinking of boys flying through the air – not an antidote to the profound lack of freedom of movement for their families but a moment of joy nonetheless.

The bustling stores along the road were more like an American strip mall than a village community. But then, as we reached the turning to Ramallah, we saw the long continuation of the road through to the Jerusalem-area town of Bir Nabala, almost deserted, its buildings shuttered and dusty. There was another part of the story of this locked enclave. We took a deep breath and drove along the Bir Nabala Road to nowhere.

As we made our way through the deserted streets, we saw



Tomb of a Muslim saint, Sheikh Hamid, with a painting of a mysterious sailing ship, Old City of Jib.

the sign for the Hanging Gardens Wedding Hall, now faded, and the building's broken windows, and its stone front covered with dust. It was once one of three successful wedding venues in Bir Nabala, including the equally prosperous A Nabali Wedding Hall. Jerusalemites came to marry in these places, which offered music, food and festivities at a reasonable price in this once bustling suburb of eastern Jerusalem. But, in 2005, Israel began constructing a new separation barrier and today Bir Nabala is a fenced-in enclave.

Musa Sabah, the owner of the Hanging Gardens, which had two wedding halls, each equipped to accommodate hundreds of guests, described the effects of the wall on his thriving business to a researcher from the Israeli human rights organisation B'tselem: 'It was like when you get dementia,' he said. Sabah, who with his brother had invested almost a million dollars in the business, lost everything. He moved to a small house with his five children, where he sat, watching, over and over, wedding videos from better days: 'They were happy times. May God bring them back.' But then he hesitated and said to the researcher, 'stop'. 'Enough.'

The name of his defunct hall evokes the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the world in ancient times. And it seems to be a popular name for wedding venues in more exotic places – the Philippines and Bali for example – as well as in the more mundane Rockford, Illinois. Scholars dispute whether the ancient Hanging Gardens, usually dated to around 600 BCE, actually existed in Babylon. Our shuttered Hanging Gardens is quickly becoming a ruin where people may well ponder whether it existed and what happened to the community that surrounded it.

Our melancholy journey along the road ended abruptly as the four-metre-high wall rose before us – the tall cement slabs topped with barbed wire. It loomed like a terrible punishment brought down on the inhabitants of this enclave. A crane on the other side of the wall cut through the sky above. On that side, the Atarot industrial zone now boasts an Israeli shopping mall, and a new neighbourhood for Orthodox Jews is also underway. We could just hear the sound of the heavy traffic beyond the wall that passes by yet another checkpoint, Qalandia, where only Palestinians with Jerusalem identity cards, permits, or, sometimes, proof of old age, can pass from Ramallah and other West Bank locations to Jerusalem.

Our side of the wall offered no passage through, although someone had painted a door with a large 'EXIT' on it and 'Al Quds' (Jerusalem) written below. An adjacent sign in bold yellow paint read 'No More Fear', and then, in black, 'Build Your Wall, We Will Overcome'. 'Most of the slogans are in English,' Penny observed. 'But who will read them?' Raja noted only one in Arabic: 'Al Quds lana' (Jerusalem is ours).

We walked on the dusty path by the wall, deserted except for several smashed cars, a torn mattress and assorted litter. A row of shops – several garages and tool shops – showed no sign of life. But then we came upon a house with a gate leading to a neat garden and a friendly couple said hello. We asked them if they lived there and they looked amused. 'No, no, this is our father's house and we are repairing the lock. Otherwise, everything will be looted.'

Perhaps no one really lives in this part of Bir Nabala any more, we thought. But then we saw a herd of black goats huddled against the wall, probably belonging to a Bedouin

herder from one of the Bir Nabala tribes. The bleating of the goats was a welcome sign of life.

And then, right next to the wall, a man and a small boy emerged from a darkened doorway. At first the man was hesitant to speak to us and the boy darted behind a shabby car but then he said, matter-of-factly, that he had spent twenty-six years in an Israeli prison only to come to this larger prison. He told us that he had a Jerusalem identity card but the detour to get to Jerusalem was far too long. He clearly did not want us to ask him more details about his life, this loner by the wall with a story he did not really want to tell. As we returned on the deserted road, a broken sign propped up by the side of the road proclaimed 'Bir Nabala' in English and in Arabic of a once elegant script.

Driving back to Ramallah, we paused, and Bassam took a photo of a locked metal door on the wall, which seemed to accompany us wherever we went. We decided not to continue to Ramallah but to turn to Qalandia village, another Palestinian community whose name has become a checkpoint and who shares with Jib and Bir Nabala the severing from Jerusalem.

Still, a note of defiance. 'Welcome to Qalandia, the northern entrance to Jerusalem', in prominent neon letters graces an arch leading to this third choked village. With 98 per cent of its land classified as Area C, Qalandia has been no stranger to hard times but the roughly one thousand villagers managed to find work in Jerusalem and elsewhere prior to the construction of the wall.

The main street of the village is still lined with attractive stone homes, and one impressive Ottoman-era palace has

A mural in Qalandia village recalling the once nearby Qalandia airport that served Palestinians until 1967. The village's access to Jerusalem is blocked by the wall.

been converted into a community centre. But driving beyond the main road into the olive orchards, we counted seven piles of rubble from homes demolished by Israel, presumably as collective punishment for families with a member who had been convicted of an attack on Israeli forces.

A decade ago, in 2012, with the wall already erected, Riwaq and other Palestinian cultural institutions launched the first edition of Qalandia International, a festival that brought artists, performers, musicians and a sizeable audience, including us, to the village. Perhaps we were under the illusion that art and our defiance could bring down the cold cement of the wall, but at least we were there in solidarity. Now the two of us were back with only our friend Bassam, to remember, reflect, photograph and write about what we saw and felt.

And then a striking wall mural lifted our spirits. Qalandia is not only the name of this village, that checkpoint, and a refugee camp – it was once the popular name for the now defunct Jerusalem airport, built by the British in 1920 as a military airport and a civilian airport from 1938 to 1967, serving the Palestinian community. On this more friendly wall, a colourful plane lifts off, its top decorated with a row of olive trees and with flowers trailing in its wake. A man in a keffiyeh at the door waves, welcoming everyone aboard.