

Stealing Jerusalem

Palestinian researchers and institutions are being forced out of the city by tough Israeli restrictions.

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THE OFFICES OF THE PALESTINIAN Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, PASSIA, still attract the players, the professors and the curious.

But these days the stream of visitors and invitees has been reduced to a trickle. This is in stark contrast to what PASSIA's head and founder, Mahdi Abdul Hadi, fondly remembers as the

near-daily exchange of ideas between journalists, politicians and academics back in its heyday, during and immediately after the first Palestinian intifada in the late 1980s to the early 1990s.

"We had them all here," he recalls with a smile, gesturing at the conference table next to him. "Palestinians, Israelis, Americans, Europeans, Muslims, Christians and Jews. Nothing was taboo around this table."

Explosive situation

But "here" is East Jerusalem, and there is possibly no other place on earth where location and identity are more explosive issues. Indeed, the fate of Jerusalem is inextricably linked to the fate of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Established in 1987, PASSIA has won renown for its academic publications and dialogue roundtables on all things related to Palestine, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and religious, cultural and social issues thrown up by the land, its peoples, religions and history.

PASSIA's publications range from research into Palestinian literary figures of the 20th century to the rise of Islamic political movements, while the roundtable discussions cover everything



DISPUTED CITY | Israeli flags and security near the golden dome of the Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City.

"There is no Palestine without Jerusalem," says PASSIA's founder Abdul Hadi. "



DIFFICULT TIMES | These days the stream of visitors and invitees to PASSIA's offices has been reduced to a trickle.



NO TABOOS | "We had them all here, Palestinians, Israelis, Americans, Europeans, Muslims, Christians and Jews" recalls PASSIA's head and founder, Mahdi Abdul Hadi.

from Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking and interfaith dialogue to good governance, democracy and human rights.

But the “vibrant exchange of ideas” was gradually reduced when the Oslo Accords threw up the Palestinian Authority with limited Palestinian self-rule in parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The subsequent Israeli closures, in the form of military checkpoints around areas Israel considers its own, notably around the city of Jerusalem, shut down traffic. “After 1995 it got much more difficult,” Abdul Hadi says. “Palestinians with West Bank IDs needed Israeli permission to enter Jerusalem, and it became more common for us to start also holding our forums in Ramallah to cater for some of these people.”

The closures and subsequent restrictions on Palestinian movement created a dilemma for Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem. East Jerusalem is considered occupied Palestinian territory by the international community, and for Palestinians it is at the heart of the Palestinian struggle, whether from a religious perspective, as the centre of Christianity and one of the holiest cities in Islam, or a cultural/historical perspective, as the locale of many of the most developed Palestinian institutions in all fields. It is also the seat of prominent Palestinian families and the focus of Palestinian political movements.

Moreover it is home to nearly a quarter of a million Palestinians, whose precarious status as Jerusalem ID holders but not Israeli citizens, nor West Bankers, left them as a vital link between the Palestinian hinterland and Israel.

No more discussions

But Israel, which unilaterally annexed the eastern part of the city after its victory in the 1967 war, is committed to maintaining Jerusalem as its “eternal and undivided capital”. Hence the Oslo Accords, with the implicit goal of dividing historical Palestine into two states, saw Israel tighten its grip on Jerusalem.

The second intifada, the so-called al-Aqsa Intifada, broke out in Jerusalem when then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon paid a high-profile visit to the Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem’s

Old City. This was a bid to assert Israel’s sovereignty and his own opposition to any division of the city in the wake of the Camp David talks between then-Israeli leader Ehud Barak and the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Restrictions on movement became even more draconian with the outbreak of that intifada in 2000, and overtly political institutions, like Orient House, which until then had functioned as the main unofficial Palestinian political address in the city, were closed by order of the Israeli Ministry of Interior.

The advent of Israel’s separation barrier, a concrete wall in Jerusalem, the construction of which was started in late 2003, meanwhile created a physical barrier separating not only Israelis from Palestinians, but Palestinians from Palestinians, families from their kin, people from their place of work and worship, and patients from decent hospitals.

Palestinian NGOs in Jerusalem had to adjust. Palestinians with Jerusalem IDs could work in the city, but those from the West Bank could not. Some NGOs let staff go, others opened up second offices in Ramallah, not far north in the West Bank, on the other side of Israeli military checkpoints and now the wall, and yet others closed up shop completely and moved to Ramallah. “Jerusalem is our cultural, social and political centre,” Abdul

Hadi says. "It is crucial that we maintain our presence here on the cultural, social and political levels. What is happening now is that Ramallah is replacing Jerusalem

as the heart of Palestine, a process that is consciously encouraged by Israel both directly, through closures of institutions like Orient House, or indirectly, by severing the links between Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank."

PASSIA opened up a second office in Ramallah, but it provided only a logistical solution, and the institute's work of necessity had to suffer. "We can no longer have the discussions we once had. West Bankers, and certainly people from Gaza, cannot come to Jerusalem. Israelis, on the other hand, cannot go to Ramallah. That cuts off a key source not only of speakers and intellectuals but also of audience. The effect on the quality and breadth of our debates has been direct and immediate."

Depending on foreigners

Salim Tamari, the head of the Institute of Jerusalem Studies (IJS), chose possibly the worst time to relocate to Jerusalem. Founded in 1996, the IJS was set up to produce scholarship in English and Arabic on the city of Jerusalem. It publishes both the *Jerusalem Quarterly* (English) and the *Hawliyyat al-Quds* (Arabic). In 2000, IJS moved from Ramallah to Jerusalem, a logical enough move for an institution that produces the only journal in the world dedicated to Jerusalem's history and heritage as well as current affairs.

The move lasted two difficult years. "It just became impossible," says Tamari, who holds a West Bank ID. "First I could apply for six-month permits to enter Jerusalem, then it became three-month permits. Then I couldn't take the car and then it was one-day permits. By 2002 we were issued no more permits."

Tamari managed, whenever possible, to sneak himself in, as did many of his staff, but it was at the risk of detention and by 2002 IJS re-opened an office in Ramallah.

Unlike PASSIA, the IJS had no core staff with Jerusalem IDs and its brief presence in Jerusalem was soon terminated despite repeated attempts at ensuring permits from the Israeli government. "We have zero presence in Jerusalem now. Personally, unless an Israeli institute applies for me, I have no access to the city."

For Tamari, the gradual exclusion of Palestinian institutions from Jerusalem is a direct violation of the Oslo Accords. He refers to the 1993 Holst Letter of Assurances, named after the former Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst, in which then-Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres promised his Norwegian counterpart that Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem would be preserved. The letter went on to say that, "all the Palestinian institutions of East Jerusalem, including the economic, social, educational, cultural, and the holy Christian and Muslim places, are performing an essential task for the Palestinian population. Needless to say, we will not hamper their activity; on the contrary, the fulfillment of this important mission is to be encouraged."

"It's a scandal," says Tamari. "One by one the Israelis have gotten rid of the Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem. We went through all the proper channels, we never engaged in any political activity, and we are specialised in the city. We didn't even receive a response to our applications for permits."

In effect, says Tamari, to work in Jerusalem now, "you need to be an international specialist, have international patronage or be employed by an

Israeli institution”.

The *Jerusalem Quarterly* has as a result had to rely on international journalists or researchers to produce copy for the journal, and while there are enough of them around, “it makes it difficult to encourage local talent”.

No Palestine without Jerusalem

A lack of local talent also exercises Abdul Hadi. “Too much now we have to rely on foreign researchers. While they bring advantages, it also means that we cannot promote Palestinian researchers. We have a lack of Palestinian researchers, of dedicated professionals, and we cannot go on relying on foreigners, however professional they may be.”

But with current Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert having clearly stated his intention to unilaterally divide historical Palestine to suit Israeli needs, with full Israeli control over Jerusalem as well as large swathes of the West Bank, a platform with which he won the recent Israeli elections, the future bodes ill. “There is no Palestine without Jerusalem,” says Abdul Hadi. “And no two-state solution. If Israel continues its unilateral policies, the stage is set for a new intifada, this time a purely religious conflict.”

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