

Jaffa – the Bride of the Sea - more than just an orange



A view from the sea at Jaffa looking east onto the city, 1898-1914. (Matson Collection)

The Jaffa Orange (or Shamouti) was the principal export of Palestine in the 1890s. The history of the Jaffa orange (and the city after which it has its name) reflects the recent history of Palestine. Just as the theft of the name, by the Zionist colonisers, reflects the greater theft of Palestinian land and identity.

The fate of the residents of Jaffa, those who owned the land, planted the groves and harvested the fruit is the same as that of the vast majority of the Palestinian people in 1948.

Understand the background to the hijacking of the Jaffa orange for the purposes of the colonisers and you understand the fear and terror which led to the dispossession of the Palestinian people. You understand the background to the dispossessed, refugees in their own land or dispersed across the globe.

City of Jaffa – an historical comment

For at least 5 000 years a fortress town existed on the site of Jaffa. It became part of the Ottoman Empire following its conquest by the Ottoman Turks in 1517. This occupation was to last 400 years during which time it developed into one of the most modern cities in the Middle East. By 1893 the population of this coastal city exceeded 42 000.

The District of Jaffa was one of Palestine's 16 districts and consisted of the city of Jaffa and 23 villages.

By 1945 land ownership for Jaffa district was recorded as:

47% Palestinian

39% Zionist (largely Jewish)

14% publicly owned/religious trusts etc

By 1948 the city was the largest in Palestine with a population of over 70 000, in addition to the 40,000 persons living in the towns and villages in its immediate vicinity. Jaffa had the misfortune to be adjacent to the largest developing Jewish conurbation, Tel Aviv. Despite the crucial fact that under the partition resolution Jaffa was designated as an Arab controlled enclave, it was soon to be decimated, with its citizens fleeing in terror from the attacking Zionist forces. In the period between the UN Partition resolution of 29 November 1947, and the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel on the 14 May 1948, about 97 percent of Jaffa's indigenous Arab Palestinian population became refugees, accounting for 15 percent of Palestinian refugees in that catastrophic year.



Young Palestinian workers in one of Jaffa's many orange groves, 1898-1914.
(Matson Collection)

The orange – Palestine’s heritage

The small bitter orange, Baladi, probably arrived in Palestine in the 9th century. The large Shamouti or Jaffa orange – as it was commercially named – probably arrived from Hindustan or Northern Iran in the 17th century. Regardless, by the 18th century Swedish naturalist Haselquist gave the first European account of oranges in Jaffa “ a forest of orange trees of a big size” The presence of grapefruit was first recorded in 1882.

While the common Zionist propaganda assertion that it was they who “made the desert bloom” can be challenged at many levels, it is best addressed by the words of the Zionists themselves

However, remind ourselves of the self-serving propaganda and lies which historical and modern Zionism generates

The country was mostly empty desert, with only a few islands of Arab settlement, and Israel’s cultivable land today was indeed redeemed from swamp and wilderness.

Shimon Peres: David’s Sling: the Arming of Israel. 1970

Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, when travelling through the north of Israel, was known to close his eyes so as not to see and acknowledge the Palestinian Arab presence. This racist cornerstone of Zionism was, and still is, reflected in many writings. When the Arab presence was acknowledged, their “backwardness” was underlined.

In the indigenous Palestinian agriculture there was no sign of progress; nothing was there but stupor and resignation became second nature – passivity and supineness.

S Zemach: The Jewish Village 1932

The diaries, writings and observations of the early Jewish travelers record otherwise.

We have Moses Montefiore, a founder of Jewish colonisation, who recorded in his diary on his first visit to Palestine in the 1830s.

The roads to Jaffa are straight and paved full of fig trees, pomegranates, and very beautiful oranges which we have never seen before.

In 1839 his wife wrote

The way through which we passed was most lovely country, planted with beautiful trees which would not be ashamed to raise their heads in England’s beautiful gardens.

Pardess Assoc.:Jubilee Book (Hebrew text) 1950

Charles Netter, founder of the first Jewish agricultural training school, Mikve Yisrael, wrote in 1867

. . . . the mountains of Judea are raised with glory against the town of Jaffa which is built within a semi-circle. After leaving the gates of the town within half an hour we come to a forest of palm trees and citrus which produce a wonderful smell. There at the place where the last lemon tree implants its trunk into the soil there starts the coastal plain of Sharon where the Ottoman Government have leased to the Alliance Israelite Universelle a broad piece of land to establish a colony for our brethren sons of Israel two hundred plots of fertile and fecund land through which the road to Jerusalem passes by and on one side a small rivulet is flowing and on the other stands the village of Yazzur inhabited by Arabs . . . I permit myself to state that we have the best piece of land in Palestine by it being close to Jaffa and on the route to Jerusalem. The fertility of the soil and the availability of construction stone on site are valuable assets. I thank God who enabled me to purchase this pearl for the alliance

Leaflet from the archives of Mikve Israel

Interestingly, but not unexpectedly – given Zionism’s track record of inventing history – one hundred year’s after the first successful citrus crop at Mikve Yisrael, the Jerusalem Post Magazine ran a centennial article in 1980, painting a different picture of Palestine of yesteryear

But when Israel’s oldest Jewish agricultural settlement and first agricultural school was established 110 years ago, there were only about 13 000 Jews in the whole country, and mostly sand and rock as far as the eye could see.

Judy Siegel: Netter’s vision was no mirage (Jerusalem Post Magazine) 30/05/80

In 1882 “The Diary of Bilui” by H Heisin painted a picture of a technically evolved Palestinian agriculture system, well adapted to the environment

We left Jaffa and came to the road of Jerusalem . . . on both sides of the road there are groves of oranges, lemons, pomegranates, in every grove there stands the owner’s house (Arab, Greek and Armenian). We turned from the road to a track that is between those Biyara (Anglisiation of the Arab word meaning orchard) and entered one of the courtyards. In the biyara they have an organized and precise irrigating system. The trees are planted in straight rows. They dig a bowl to collect water around each. In the middle of the grove a well has been sunk, a mule, horse, or camel turns a wheel on the axis of which a chain is rotating attached to it are boxes which scoop up the water. The water is collected in a stone pool and from it there lead out in various directions stone channels.

Every biyara is fenced by natural Sabra (a native cactus) hedge.

H Hiesin: Diary of a Bilui 1882

It was well established Arab expertise which the early Zionist colonisers and putative agriculturists were forced to call upon time and time again. A case in point was Rabbi Dev David Fellman, an immigrant from Central Europe and founder of Yessod Ha’ma’aleh. He bought 10 acres in Kufur Sumeil (now the site of Arlossorof Street, Tel Aviv). A contemporary newspaper gave an account of his experiences:

One of our wealthy brothers who came here a few days ago purchased for himself a garden near Jaffa and established his home there this settler emigrated in 1883 and immediately dedicated himself to citriculture under the instruction of the former Arab grove owner . . . a small group of Jewish immigrants tried to settle in the same Sumeil neighbourhood but their groves failed and they moved to Petah Tikva. The settler Rubin Lerrer bought a big citrus farm with a well in Wassi-el-Knanin from a German settler of the Templar sect. Because he could not cope with the work he started to sell pieces of the land to new settlers who were founders of Moshava Ness Tziyona (1882) . . . the town of Jaffa was surrounded with citrus gardens before the business of Jewish settlements in the country started.

Ibid

The trade in oranges was considerable. In the 1880s Peretz Pascal wrote

It is sold in the shore cities in woven baskets the height of which is 80cm and is transported to the markets by sailing ships merchants brought from Italy packing material and started small despatches of fruit in special cases called Marseilia, to France, England and other markets. It seems that the commercial experiments were successful because the development and widening of the groves is proceeding.

Ibid

A brief look at Palestine's land ownership and citriculture

Statistics from various sources outline the

land area of Palestine under citrus cultivation

(1 acre = 4 dunums)

1930	106 820 dunums
1938	300 000 dunums
1945	263 000 dunums
1947	255 000 dunums

Breakdown of previous ownership of Jewish owned land (1929)

<u>From the <i>effendi</i></u>	<i>from the fellahin</i>
<u>(landowners)</u>	<u>(peasantry)</u>
1 124 000dunums	75 500dunums

Until 1860 nearly all the cultivated land in Palestine was owned by village communities and was shared out by the inhabitants. By 1870 this system had all but collapsed thanks, in particular, to the impact of debt

At this point the emergence of individual land owners, the impact of Ottoman taxes and money lenders on these owners, all led to the creation of a class of landless labourers. In parallel, large estates were created, so by the 1920s, 250 families owned as much as the peasant population put together.

Ominously, this decay of traditional, social, communal land ownership gave Zionist land purchasers their opportunity.

With the establishment of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) in 1901, there was a drive to establish a Hebrew/Jewish economy, to the exclusion of all Palestinian Arab labour. (Yemenite Jews, for example, were encouraged to emigrate thus providing replacements for cheap Palestinian labour.)

In 1922 there were just 800 Jewish agricultural workers in citriculture. Helped by Ramsay MacDonald's letter to Weizmann in 1931, which gave Jewish organisations permission to hire only Jews and lease land only to Jews, this number was 5 500 by 1933.

By 1890 large scale growing and export of citrus produce was well established. By 1900 about 15% of all land under citrus cultivation was Jewish owned with a portion of their output bought from Arab sources i.e. not planted by Jewish owners. This reached about 30% by 1914.

In 1927 riots took place when Arab labourers were forcibly prevented from picking oranges in Jewish owned groves.

By 1930 around one third of rural Palestinian families were landless with 94% of Jewish land purchases made from large (largely absentee) landowners. Tens of thousands of peasant families were evicted.

In the early 1930s the Histadrut (Israel's trade union federation) picketed orange groves employing Arab labour. Arab groups organized counter pickets and boycotted Jewish produce.

In April 1936 groups in Jaffa and Nablus called for a General Strike against "Hebrew labour" and further Zionist immigration. It lasted 6 months. It should be noted that the agricultural sector was not the most important part of the "National Jewish Economy". In 1936, of the 376 000 Jews in Palestine only 73 000 lived in the rural areas. By 1945 only 10.7% were employed in agriculture – all in sharp contrast to the Palestinian labour force.

For 1947 the *Palestine Citrus Board* found the land area under citrus cultivation to be 52.8% Arab owned and 47.2% Jewish owned. Of the latter as much as half had already been planted by the previous Arab owners – most of fruit bearing age (it can take as long as 7 years for a tree to reach the fruit bearing stage).

The land area and ownership for various citrus produce, for the same year, was as follows:

	Shamouti	Valencia	Grapefruit
Arab	101 000dun.	11000dun.	2 000dun.
Jewish	79 000dun.	12 000dun	11 000dun.

Note

It is worth recording that with the success of its citrus exports, Jaffa witnessed the emergence and growth of various related economic sectors, from banks to land and sea transportation enterprises to import and export firms. As the city grew, local industrial production evolved and developed with the opening of metal-work, glass, ice, cigarettes, textiles, sweet factories, transportation-related equipment together with mineral and carbonated water, and various foodstuffs.

During the mandate years tens of thousands of tourists and pilgrims visited the historic city every year. Jaffa was also the cultural capital of Palestine, being home to tens of the most important newspapers and publication houses in the country, including the dailies *Filastin* and *al-Difa'*. The most important and ornate cinemas were in Jaffa, as were tens of athletics clubs and cultural societies.

However, by the end of 1948 the only part of the citrus industry not captured by the “Hebrew state” was that part in Gaza. The West Bank had little citriculture. Out of the Arab owned 123 000dunums of mature citrus groves in 1948, only 5 000 remained with their owners.

The rest was expropriated –a euphemism for theft on a grand scale – under the hurried and convenient Law of Abandoned Property.

The Custodian of this so-called “Absentee Property” leased the land to both new settlers and large companies. Predominant amongst the latter was Yakhin-Hakal, a large fruit and agricultural product firm.

As for the city and port of Jaffa, just how did it fare? Tel Aviv had started its life as an exclusive Jewish town – essentially a suburb of Jaffa’s old port. It was, however expanding. The 1936 General Strike in Palestine closed the port of Jaffa. Thereafter Jewish merchants refused to trade through Jaffa. By 1950 it had ceased trading on any scale.



A view of Jaffa from the north beach looking south, 1900-1920. (Matson Collection)

A closer look at Jaffa, the Sub-District of Jaffa, and the total decimation of the Palestinian Arab population of the area now gives the reality touch to the above outline.

The town and port of Jaffa, its surrounding villages, together with the land, comprised an area of around 85 000 acres. Remember, Jaffa district with a population in 1946 which was 71% Jewish was the most colonized part of Palestine. By the 1940s, adjacent Tel Aviv had grown from a small settlement to the second largest city in Palestine - all in the space of 25 years.

Jaffa town was predominantly Arab with a population of over 100 000, of whom about 28 000 were Jewish. The rest of the Sub-District had a majority Jewish population. They, however, only owned 39% of the land. Arab owners accounted for a further 47% with the remaining 14% publicly owned. Prior to the events of 1948, of the eleven localities with more than 750 acres devoted to citrus, only two – Petah Tikva and Kefar Sava – were Jewish settlements.

This was the Jaffa and district which was about to face a combined onslaught from the regular army, the Haganah, and the Irgun. Such was the affinity between the two terrorist organizations (both perpetrated massacres during 1948), they eventually merged.

Events of 1948

During December 1947 the Mayor of Jaffa, Yussuf Haykal, tried to negotiate a truce with the advancing Haganah and Jewish leader, David Ben Gurion. However, such a scenario formed no part of the plans of the Zionists. No interest was shown. And so it was that on 4th January 1948 the Stern Gang, an off-shoot of the Irgun, parked a lorry bomb in central Jaffa. The resultant blast destroyed the old Turkish Government House, the Central Police station and a corner of Barclay's Bank. This resulted in the death of up to 30 people. With Government House having premises used as a social welfare society for feeding children and the destitute, many of the dead and around 100 injured were children.

As if to prove there was not much difference between the Irgun and the "regular" Haganah, on 14th March the latter blew up 15 houses in the Abu Kebir Quarter, resulting in the death of 'about 20 Arabs.' The demolition squad then moved on to the Manieh Quarter and blew up a further 4 houses.

Under the auspices of Operation Chametz the Haganah's role was to lay siege to, and isolate, Jaffa by seizing surrounding villages.

The Irgun tactic was one of indiscriminate and massive shelling of the residential, commercial section and centre of Jaffa in order to provoke large scale civilian panic leading to mass evacuation to safety – by land and sea.

Their principal weapons were two 3inch mortars stolen from the British army and, commencing at dawn, 24th April, bombarded Jaffa "without respite" for three days with a total of 20 tons of high explosives aimed at the heart of the town. This was accompanied by the entry of 3 000 terrorists, drawn from around Palestine for this well planned operation, into Jaffa - which, it should be remembered, had been earmarked under the UN partition resolution as part of the proposed Arab state. Reporters were refused access by the Zionist forces as the Irgun, male and female, advanced from house to house using grenades and anti-tank bazookas.

On the evening of the 28th the Irgun launched their second assault of the day. Row by row, blocks of houses were blown up creating fear and terror amongst the civilian population.

General Murray observed

I saw a scene which I never thought to see in my life. It was the sight of the whole population of Jaffa pouring out on to the road carrying in their hands whatever they could pick up. . . . as fast as their legs could carry them. It was a case of sheer terror.

The Palestinian Catastrophe Michael Palumbo (p.87)



Palestinians from Jaffa attempt to take with them whatever they can as Zionist militias force them to leave the city, May 1948.
(Palestine Remembered)

And the Zionist gunmen and snipers took full advantage of the targets presented by the panic stricken, defenceless fleeing population of Jaffa. *“Those bullets went through the bodies of people standing by the sea shore”*. Recalled 12 year old Iris Shammout. Many people drowned as they clamoured to get into boats ready to evacuate them to a waiting Greek steamship. Babies fell overboard with mothers trying to save them.

Another young child would have witnessed this “liberation” of his homeland by the Zionist colonisers. Eleven year old Sabri al-Banna, although he did not realize it at the time, said his final farewell to his homeland, to the citrus plantations and export business owned by his family, his home and whole way of life. Years later, under the *nom de guerre* of Abu Nidal, he was to adopt the terrorist mindset of those who forced him from his home and use this against his perceived enemies.

Eventually the British Government, the mandatory power in Palestine with a remit to govern and protect the population, was forced into action with troops and tanks stationed in the town and Spitfires flying over Irgun positions. However, during this onslaught, the role of British troops was reduced to that of an escort to the terror stricken population out of Jaffa in their effort to reach relative safety.

By the 30th April Jaffa was completely cut off from the interior, under siege, with the sea the only outlet. Over the next two weeks a further 15 000 people evacuated Jaffa, by sea, to relative safety.

By the 9th May the picture painted of Jaffa – once the Bride of the Sea – was one of abject desolation. A few score vessels taking refugees to destinations unknown. A few hundred Jaffa residents could be seen wandering about dazed, confused and impoverished. At this point it was estimated that up to 3 000 remained, all on the verge of starvation.

Jaffa formally surrendered on 13th May 1948. On this day the British forces quit Jaffa.

The town was subject to looting. One estimate gave the death total amongst Jaffa’s residents at 1 300.

Immediate aftermath

Approximately 4,000 of the 120,000 Palestinians affected were to remain in their city under military occupation. They were all rounded up and ghettoized in the al-Ajami neighborhood which was sealed off from the rest of the city and administered as essentially a military prison for the next two years. This military regime lasted until 1966. During this period, al-Ajami was completely surrounded by barbed wire fencing that was patrolled by Israeli soldiers and guard dogs. It was not long before the new Jewish residents of Jaffa, and based on their experience under the Nazis in Europe, began to refer to the Palestinian neighborhood as the "ghetto."

Overnight the Palestinians who remained in Jaffa, or had fled to safety, lost everything: their city, their friends, their families, their property and their entire physical and social environment. Most forced into al-Ajami lost their homes. All freedoms were denied, with the Israeli military commander taking up the mantle of judge and executioner. Without his permission one could not enter or leave the ghetto, the right to things like education and work were denied. And with Arab states classified as enemy states, making contact with the expelled family and friends, the refugees, was strictly prohibited.

Jaffa was administratively engulfed by the Tel Aviv municipality which became known as Tel Aviv-Yafo; the Palestinians of Jaffa went from being a majority in their city and homeland to a minority, an "enemy of the state." The municipality immediately began drawing up plans for what they called the "Judaization" of the city, renaming the Arabic streets of the city after Zionist leaders, demolishing much of the old Arab architecture, and completely destroying the buildings in the surrounding neighborhoods and villages that were depopulated during the ethnic cleansing of 1948.

Those relatively few who remained in Jaffa relate how their homes, often just metres away from the ghetto, were seized, and how they could do nothing about it. There are stories of how their homes were given to, or simply taken by, new Jewish immigrants, and how they would try to convince the new residents of their homes to give them back some of their furniture, or clothes, or documents, or photographs. In some of these cases, the house's new resident would give back some of the items, in most of the cases the response was to consider the original Palestinian owner an intruder, and to call the police or report him to the military commander. Former residents of the al-Manshiyya neighbourhood, one of the city's wealthier areas before the Nakba, described the sorrow they felt as they walked past their old houses, and the pain of seeing what remained of the neighbourhood demolished to be replaced by a public recreation area.

Some of the most difficult stories are those of the Palestinian farmers and peasants from the villages of the Jaffa district. They describe how they were forced off of their land, how they managed to stay in Palestine, how the Israeli government handed their land over to Jewish settlers, and how these settlers then hired the same Palestinian farmers to work on their own land as day labourers. In fact, after their properties and enterprises were seized or shut down, the vast majority of the Jaffa Palestinians who remained became cheap labor for Jewish employers. Their employment was contingent on their "loyalty" to the new state. And so it was that those who ran the economic hub of Palestine before 1948, became its orphans feigning loyalty to the ones who orphaned them in order to feed their own children.

“Rubbing it in”

The process of absorbing thousands of new Jewish immigrants from around the world, proved to be problematic. This was resolved by distributing the homes of refugee and internally displaced Palestinians to the new immigrants. After all the Palestinian homes in Jaffa had been occupied, Israeli housing authorities began dividing the homes in the Ajami ghetto into apartments so as to provide housing for Jewish families. As such, an Arab family in Ajami, who had been displaced from their original home, and whose family and friends had been expelled, and who lived in a house with four rooms, for example, would have their new home divided into four apartments to absorb three Jewish immigrant families, and the four families would share the kitchen and bathroom.

This process was one of the most difficult for the Palestinian families; they were forced into "co-habitation" with the people who had expelled them and, considering that many of the Jewish families included members who were serving in the army, people who were directly carrying out the ongoing violence suffered by the remaining Palestinian community.

The horrors of war, the loss of their country, the deep rupture in the social environment, the trauma of oppression, occupation, segregation and discrimination, the demolition or theft of their original homes before their own eyes, being forced to share their homes in the ghetto with the people who expelled them from their original homes, all combined to create an overall feeling of despair and impotence among the remaining community of Palestinians in Jaffa.

Then there was the practice, on Israel's "Independence Day", of military governors allowing their subjects to leave their enclaves for picnics on the remnants of their villages, if those were not already inhabited by new Jewish immigrants. That which was prohibited all year was allowed for one day, so they could be allowed to celebrate on their own ruins.

The resultant collective depression eventually led many of Jaffa's ghettoized Palestinian residents down the path of dependency on drugs and alcohol as a way of escaping the burden of powerlessness in the face of colonial oppression. It was this form of colonial oppression that transformed the thriving Bride of the Sea to a poverty and crime-ridden neighborhood of Tel Aviv.

1951-1979: survival and self-improvement

The main goal of those successful in remaining on the land, albeit as "internally displaced persons" with eventual Israeli citizenship, was survival in the face and fear of Israeli military authority. They were motivated by hope for a better life, a return to how things once were, for freedom. This was encouraged, in the late 1950s and 1960s, by ideas of Arab unity, Palestinian liberation, cultural revival with emphasis on self-improvement, working hard [often the manual labour jobs that Jewish immigrants avoided] to provide for their families and their children's education.

With the need to justify its status as the "only democracy in the Middle East" - a democracy founded on racism with two sets of laws for two sets of citizens, the Israeli government formally abandoned the regime of military rule in 1966. However systematic discrimination against Palestinian citizens continued unabated. This resulted in the emergence of the Association for the Care of Arab Affairs in 1979. The Association was formed by activists and intellectuals who aimed to protect what remained of the city's Arab-Palestinian identity and heritage, to fight the systematic discrimination faced by the Palestinians of Jaffa, and to spearhead campaigns on important issues facing the Palestinian community, foremost among them housing and education.

Throughout the 1970s the Palestinians of Jaffa continued to feel increasing pressure to leave their homes in the city through various discriminatory policies and practices, such as those banning Palestinians from renovating their homes since these properties were largely registered as absentee property [under the Absentee Property Law of 1950 the property was leased to the tenants with title held by the state]. The municipal authorities had ignored the neighbourhood, allowing many houses to collapse, and in some cases ordered the demolition of Palestinian homes. As a result of these deteriorating conditions, most of the Jewish residents of Ajami had moved to the city's suburbs or to the illegal settlements on the West Bank.

1979-2000: the return of the spirit

By the onset of the 1980s, both as a result of natural growth, and because a growing number of Palestinians displaced from elsewhere in Israel gravitated towards Jaffa, the population had increased. Literacy and education levels among the adult Palestinian population in the city had also risen. Many had opened their own small enterprises like restaurants, contracting firms and car repair shops. A small number had also been able to complete post-secondary education in professional fields such as law, medicine, accounting, engineering and others. As such, the economic, social and demographic balance of the city had begun to restore itself.

The increase in the city's Palestinian population, and the improvement of their social and economic condition was coupled with the increase in the number of Palestinians who began to move to other parts of what remained of Jaffa beyond the the Ajami ghetto, particularly to the nearby coastal Jabaliya neighborhood. This phenomenon was largely the result of the overcrowding in Ajami, and since the combination of poverty, municipal neglect and the discriminatory policies banning Palestinians from renovating had resulted in further deterioration of their living conditions

The improvement in the standard of living of Jaffa's Palestinians that began in the 1980s involved the increase in the number of Arab owned and operated enterprises, the renovation of Palestinian mosques, churches and public buildings, as well as annual increases in the number of post-secondary graduates most of whom reinvested their acquired skills and knowledge in the betterment of their community. While the state and municipal authorities continued their Judaization efforts, the Palestinian community had become an active and effective player in the life of their city. Working against this economic development within the community has been the fact that the Israeli government has not invested or supported Palestinian-owned enterprise while simultaneously subsidizing and investing heavily in Jewish-owned enterprises in Tel Aviv. This economic discrimination has played an important role in making Palestinian Jaffa economically dependent on Jewish Tel Aviv.

The 1990s witnessed a powerful political and cultural revival among Palestinian citizens of Israel. The fear that had been a powerful force facing their grandparents did not affect them in the same way, and as a largely educated generation, the disparity between the ideals of "Israeli democracy" taught in school and the discrimination faced in their daily lives drew increasing members of this generation into the political arena. The growing national awareness of Jaffa's Palestinians materialized during the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada when the Palestinian youth of Jaffa protested the brutal Israeli military violence against the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza by organizing dozens of forums, protests, pickets and fundraising campaigns to stress the unity of the Palestinian people across borders.

Jaffa today – the ethnic cleansing continues

And how do the 20 000 (+) Palestinian Israeli citizens of Jaffa fare to day? Possibly the answer is summed up in the words "continuing discrimination" and "discriminated against", all underpinned by the passing of the unarguably illegal Absentee Property Law (1950) which "legitimized" the seizure of the property of all Palestinians who were not present in their property and which still threatens their tenure and cultural identity.

The most pressing issue facing Palestinians in Jaffa today is the issue of housing and eviction. Every Palestinian in Jaffa is either directly facing eviction by the municipal authorities, or has a neighbour or relative who faces such eviction, an estimated total of more than 500 families are in this situation. The two main excuses for eviction are lack of licensing -- especially since licenses are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain -- or that the family is considered illegal squatters in their own home which is registered as state property.

Title to the vast majority of properties in Jaffa was transferred to the state [to Amidar, a state-run company managing state properties in urban areas] through the implementation of the Absentee Property Law (1950). This mass eviction of Palestinians from their homes [in which some have lived for over 60 years] in Jaffa serves two purposes. The first, and primary purpose, is political with Judaization aimed at changing the demography and the Palestinian nature of Jaffa. The second aspect is gentrification, with much of the property earmarked for demolition, to be replaced with expensive housing developments. Thus the interests of Zionism and property developers merge. In the context of the latter, it should be noted that the Ajami ghetto, while by far the poorest neighborhood in the Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality, is also a coastal neighborhood with some of the highest property value in the city.

So today, the picture of Jaffa is akin to painting by numbers. Each painted sector contributing to the Zionist dream and intent of a Jaffa free of its indigenous people:

the hundreds of eviction and demolition orders; Amidar and the Israeli Lands Administration putting up tens of Palestinian homes for auction; rapidly increasing property values; the construction of the Peres "Peace" Centre on confiscated Jaffa refugee property; the establishment of a centre for Jewish fundamentalists in the heart of the Ajami neighborhood.

The picture illustrates the uprooting of the original inhabitants of Jaffa, replaced by those who have money and power: the elites of the Jewish-Israeli establishment. While the state hands out properties to Jewish settlers almost for free in other Palestinian cities like al-Lydd and Ramleh as well as in the Naqab (Negev) and now Jaffa, the indigenous people of Palestine are dealt with as illegal squatters and intruders. And so the 20% of Israeli citizens who are Palestinian Israeli own only 3.5% of the land.

The invention of Jaffa – the big lie



Jaffa's clock tower, approximately 1914. (Matson Collection)

One of the most prominent landmarks in the city of Jaffa is the clock tower built by the Ottomans at the entrance to the old city, long before Israel came into being. The clock tower is home to a

Hebrew-language plaque that states "*In Memory of the Heroes who Fell in the Battle to Liberate Yafo.*" The same "heroes" who bombarded Jaffa, who terrorized the residents forcing them to flee.

Nearby there are the information sign posts courtesy of the Tel Aviv municipal authority. Here can be read the Zionist history of the city, allegedly covering thousands of years until the present day. The signs are written in four languages, none of which are Arabic. In none of these appears any mention of Arabs or Palestinians who only pop up in one line: "in the year 1936, Arab barbarians attacked the Jewish neighborhood." More examples of the systematic erasure of the Arab-Palestinian history of Jaffa abound, namely the replacement of the names of streets, neighbourhoods and other landmarks in the city with Hebrew names, most often names of Zionist political and military figures.

In addition to burying its Arab-Palestinian identity, Israel is burying the evidence of its crime. If there were no Palestinians here, then there were no Palestinians for Israel to kick out. This erasure of Palestinian memory is also strongly reflected in the Israeli education system in Arab schools. For the most part, Arab public schools are largely neglected in the allocation of funding and resources, and the quality of education is very low relative to the schools of the Jewish community. This has driven many Palestinian parents in Jaffa to send their children to Jewish schools, a phenomenon that has amplified the identity crises facing many of the city's Palestinian youth, as well as their difficulty with the Arabic language.

Jaffa: the struggle continues

In the 1970s, the Palestinian rights movement consistently challenged Israeli policies and in Jaffa, this struggle has managed to bring about some tangible victories, among them stopping the municipality from transforming the beach into a waste-dumping ground, pressuring the Israeli authorities to build housing units for Palestinians in the city, and establishing independent Arab educational institutions such as a nursery and the Arab Democratic School which opened its doors to students in 2003. This struggle has been the main factor enabling Palestinians to remain steadfast in their historic city.

Today, the struggle continues under the banner of the Jaffa Popular Committee for the Defense of Land and Housing Rights (also known as the Popular Committee against House Demolition in Jaffa) which was established in March 2007 as a direct response to the hundreds of eviction orders issued to the Palestinian residents of the Ajami and Jabaliya neighborhoods of Jaffa. The importance of the Committee's work soon became clear to its members when their preliminary research revealed that 497 Palestinian homes in Jaffa were under threat of eviction and/or demolition by the Israeli Lands Administration, which had also put up many of these properties -- all of them "absentee" properties -- for auction.

A central aspect of the Committee's work is pressuring the various arms of the Israeli authorities (the Israeli Lands Administration, Amidar, Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality) to freeze all legal actions taken for the purpose of eviction, demanding that these authorities enter a dialogue with the Committee instead, in order to reach an agreed-upon solution. The Committee also demands an end to any and all sale and auction of "publicly owned" (i.e. absentee/refugee) land, and entering a dialogue with the committee to implement a system that guarantees the long-term Palestinian presence in the city, and that enables youth and young couples to find affordable housing in the city, particularly in the Jabaliya and Ajami neighborhoods. The motivating spirit of the campaign launched by the Popular Committee is the need to wrest recognition of Jaffa's Arab-Palestinians as a group with a historic rights to the land and properties of the city, and that as such, alternative solutions to Jaffa's housing problem must be reached in consultation and with the consent of indigenous community.

And it is not just the living who have needs in Jaffa. In January 2008 the Supreme Court approved

the sale of half the land in the Tasso Cemetery to private developers, thus ending a 35-year-long legal saga. The residents protested discrimination against them, fearing a housing complex being built on part of the city's only Muslim cemetery.

Case study 1



The Hattab home -- grey paint peeling from the walls, foundations sinking through the ground -- is squeezed in by brightly painted, three-storey villas blocking its view of the Mediterranean Sea.

"Our neighborhood is shrinking. But why should we have to leave? It's where we've raised our children, where we grew up. If we're all evicted, well, you tell me who is left," says the Hattab's neighbor, Esther Seba.

She and the Hattabs are among almost 500 Arab families struggling to keep a toehold in Ajami, the Arab section of Jaffa that is rapidly becoming an artsy alternative to the brash modernity of Israel's metropolis Tel Aviv next door. "The government should help us find a way to buy our homes or pay rent. Instead, they're trying to clear us out of here. Where are we going to go?" says 33-year-old Esther.

Ownership of much of the property is disputed. Ajami, once a slum slated for demolition, is in the birth pangs of rapid gentrification and developers won't wait.

"These people are living in shacks with million-dollar beach views," said Yudit Ilany, 49, a Jewish Israeli resident and activist who is trying to help families keep their homes. Five years ago, residents were awoken by the occasional night-time commotions of a violent slum, a subject explored in the movie "Ajami," Israel's entry for the 2010 Academy Awards. Today, residents say it's not gunshots, but early morning construction crews that shatter the calm here.

Benign neglect

Ironically, it was long neglect by the twinned Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality that preserved the narrow alleyways and traditional, but decaying, Arab architecture.

Jaffa was a major port and cultural center of the Arab world before Tel Aviv was established in 1909 by Jewish settlers. In the war that established Israel in 1948, much of Jaffa's Arab population was driven out or fled and the old city is now a shadow of its former self, absorbed by its modern neighbour. But while once considered an eyesore, Ajami's character today tempts those fleeing Tel Aviv's soaring prices and burgeoning high-rise apartment blocks. Six years ago, a house here cost \$50,000 to \$60,000. Today, a 140 sqm (1,500 sq ft) plot goes for about \$1.2 million.

The prickly problem is the fate of Ajami's 20,000 Arab residents, 80 percent of whom live below the poverty line. About a quarter of them live in state-run "Absentee Ownership" properties, which the Israeli government now wants to sell. Israel says these homes were abandoned by their Arab owners during the 1948 war that established the Jewish state. When the war ended, the state took them over as public housing for both Jewish and Arab families. Refugees, many of whom ended up in camps in the Palestinian enclave of the Gaza Strip, down the coast, say their families were driven out of Jaffa and still lay claim to homes there.

Born squatters

Most Arab residents of Ajami say they are living in homes that were once owned by their families, and should be treated as rightful heirs. Instead, they are "protected tenants" whose right to the homes expired after two post-1948 generations.

"If you are from the third generation, you became a squatter the day you were born," Ilany said.

The "squatters" are now fighting eviction. They say Amidar, the company contracted by Israel's Land Authority (ILA) to run the properties, stands to make a killing by selling their homes. "The government became a profit-seeking company," said Sami Abu Shihadeh, who sits for Ajami on Tel Aviv-Jaffa city council.

The Ministry of Housing told Reuters that any questions about issues relating to the "Absentee Owner" law should be addressed to the ILA. Neither the ILA nor its subcontractor Amidar responded to repeated requests for interviews, by telephone and in writing.

Latifah Hattab is typical of third-generation families trying to establish legal and historical rights to the houses they live in. The Hattabs, juggling eight different law suits, were offered a jigsaw settlement by Amidar. "They said we had rights to 60 percent of this property, because my husband's mother is second generation, but the other 40 percent is theirs," said Latifah, whose single-level house sits on about 120 sq.m. "They want us to buy them out. But guess how much they say that 40 percent is worth? Two million shekels (\$540,000) or more! How am I going to get that kind of money?"

Though they are sitting on million-dollar properties, low-income families like the Hattabs cannot simply sell, or raise big loans, because their ownership is disputed.

Nowhere to go

Esther Seba says the aim is clearly to get Arabs out.

"If the state wanted us here, they would build some affordable housing," she said. "Instead, they built a park. What are we going to do with a park? We need houses." Ajami's Arab residents say they are being encouraged to move to inland Israeli cities, such as Lod, also known as Lydda, or Ramla, where there are large Arab populations and cheap housing.

"We have high housing prices combined with a strategic political effort to get Arabs out of Jaffa," said Omar Siksik, an Arab representative at the municipality who believes there are more than purely market forces at play here. Siksik shares the view of fellow councilman Abu Shihadeh who says that "the overwhelming majority of those who are wealthy and who are in administrative positions here are Jews." And that, they say, adds a racial and political dimension. "That's the problem," says Abu Shihadeh. "There is gentrification everywhere. But here, the victims are Arabs, and the beneficiaries are Jews."

Jewish activist Ilany says there is no viable alternative to Ajami for Jaffa Arabs, whether they are Muslims or Christians, who want to carry on living in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. "Ajami has employment opportunities because it's close to Tel Aviv. They can't move to neighbouring areas, which have no mosques, no churches, no Arabic language schools," she says.

"And why should they leave because some wealthy person can afford the land they've always lived on?" (*Dream location, legal nightmare as Jaffa gentrifies* Erika Solomon (Reuters) 13/01/2010)

Case Study 2



Members of the Shaya family.

Tziona Tajer Street in Jaffa, off the main thoroughfare, Yefet, begins with a lush park and ends in a narrow picturesque alleyway bounded by refurbished old homes. One of these houses, behind a heavy blue gate, belongs to the Shaya family. Hanging by the entrance is a large portrait of the family patriarch, Salim Khoury Shaya, a priest who served in the 1920s as the spiritual leader of the Christian Arab (Greek Orthodox) community. Around that time he also built the house on a hill in Jaffa.

Salim Khoury Shaya died at age 90 in 1963. His daughter-in-law, Fadwa Shaya, who married his son George, is now the eldest resident of the house, where she has lived since 1947 and where her children and some of her grandchildren grew up. In the guest room, surrounded by hand-carved dressers and ornate 1930s-era mirrors, she tells the story of the Shaya family, at least the three generations she knows.

Salim Khoury Shaya's seven children, she says, lived in the house their father built. In 1948, three of them went to visit relatives in Lebanon, where they got stuck when Israel's War of Independence broke out and weren't able to return. The other four siblings - George, Evelyn, Awda and Claire Shaya - remained in the house; their children are now in their 40s.

In 1950, after the Knesset passed the Absentee Property Law, the house was transferred to the Custodian of Absentee Property. (A 1954 Supreme Court ruling said that "the Absentee Property Law is meant to fill a temporary role: to preserve absentee properties lest they become abandoned and open to looting.") It took nine years, until 1959, for the state to recognize the rights of the four siblings who were not absentees and still lived in the house, but the authorities still did not completely give up their hold on the property.

Instead, a partnership was declared giving the state ownership of 40 percent of the house in place of the absentee siblings. The family was left with ownership of the other 60 percent. Government-owned housing company Amidar, which took over management of the property, says there are hundreds more such houses, all belonging to Arabs, that have been jointly owned by the state since some of the owners left in 1948 or later.

In the 1950s, George Shaya and his siblings tried to fight the forced partnership, arguing that before they left the other siblings sold them their stake in the house. The absentee siblings also traveled to Cyprus and signed an affidavit to this effect, but an Israeli court rejected it. In June 1960, the court turned down the siblings' request to receive full ownership of their house, and in 1963 the Israel Lands Administration received custody of 40 percent of the house. That year, Salim Khoury Shaya died.

George Shaya continued to fight for the house until his death in 1973. His daughter, Mary Kusa, remembers her father always saying that "I don't want to buy my house." She and the other children grew up, married and had families. Some still live in the house.

George's son Sami says that in the 1990s they tried to buy the state's stake in the house, but Amidar refused. Amidar maintains, meanwhile, that the company wanted to sell but that disputes in the family prevented the deal from going through.

Amidar also says that over the years the family has refused to sign a contract and pay rental fees to Amidar, even though, "by law, when one or more owners makes exclusive use of the property he must pay the owners a relative portion of the fees for use of the property."

Fadwa Shaya says the family feared that paying rent would be perceived as conferring recognition of the state's ownership of the house, so they did not pay. She also says the state did not see to the maintenance of the house, as it should have. "I paid and took care of every problem that came up," she says. "There were times when everything was falling apart and I paid for everything, even when I was a widow with four children."

The family ignored the demands for rent payments until, in June 2007, they received a demand that was hard to ignore, for a payment of about NIS 213,000 - a cumulative bill for seven years of rent (calculated at 40 percent of monthly rent of NIS 6,340). The siblings asked Amidar to look into the matter. They say the company was understanding and promised to get back to them. The family waited patiently and cooperated with an appraiser sent by Amidar to value the house; they also cooperated with the people who took measurements to see if anything had changed over the years.

In retrospect, says one daughter, Anisa Shaya, "We learned that we were fighting people who weren't really concerned about the people whose house this was. They were only interested in the business side - how much they'd get if the house were sold."

The siblings say Jaffa's rising property values are behind the move. According to Kusa, "Our feeling is that Amidar came after us. When we went to them [in June 2007] they didn't give us a straight answer and just asked for the neighbors' phone numbers. One day, my brother got a phone call from a detective wanting information about who lived in the house. Apparently they wanted to check if the house was rented and if they could demand part of the rental money."

They were even more stunned when, less than three months later, with no prior notice and without having received any answers, the ILA's development arm sued them in Tel Aviv Magistrate's Court. The authority was seeking to dissolve the partnership, which basically meant that the house would be sold. "It's a feeling of injustice," says Anisa Shaya. "First they show up out of the blue demanding money, and the next minute they want to throw us out on the street. Where is my mother who has lived in this house since 1947 supposed to go?"

The first hearing in the case is scheduled for February. Attorney Hisham Shabaita from Tel Aviv University's Human Rights Clinic is representing the family. "The state is cynically and aggressively seeking to dispossess citizens of their home that was built before the state's founding, solely because they are Arabs," he says. "The state's aim to act upon a dubious partnership in a residence, a partnership born out of the controversial Absentee Property Law ... stems from pure greed."

Kusa adds: "I have no doubt that if we were Jews the state would not be doing this. Our whole lives we have felt that we are part of this society. Even as a member of a minority I never considered anywhere else home. But it's clear to me that if I were to convert, they would behave differently." Even now, with the echoes of their father's battle still in their heads, the siblings say all they want is to resolve the dispute and acquire the state's stake in the property. But they say the other side has no desire to reach a solution and is only interested in tapping the property's value.

Amidar, which manages the ILA development arm's assets, said in response that since 2005 it has been in contact with the family in an attempt to reach an accord over the sale of the lot, but the family has not been able to come to an agreement to acquire the property.

"In September 2007, Amidar filed a lawsuit in court over the use of the property without payment of rent to the company, in accordance with the assessment of appropriate usage fees," the company says. It says Amidar's development authority for Tel Aviv-Jaffa "would be pleased to cooperate with and come to an agreement with the family."

(*Why is Israel laying claim to an Arab home in Jaffa?* Dana Weiler-Polak *Ha'aretz* 22/11/09)

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This brief look at Jaffa was produced for the Palestine Israel Ethical Shopping Initiative by Scottish Friends of Palestine (info@scottish-friends-of-palestine.org)

