

Colonial Subjugation, Not Organic Integration: East Jerusalemites and the Delusion of West Jerusalem

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Abstract

While the Israeli government cements its annexation of East Jerusalem amid the failure of the peace process and Israel's push for normalization with the Arab world, most recently the Abraham accords, the Palestinians of Jerusalem – categorized as “permanent residents,” not citizens – are challenging their non status. Many are individually maneuvering economic, social and perhaps political, change in a direction that further distances them from their fellow Palestinians in the West Bank. As that relationship shrinks due to its restricted access, a new comradeship is being strengthened between Jerusalem Palestinians and their fellow Palestinians living within Israel. This shift could be significant on the larger political level, potentially upsetting the two-state project. At the same time, Palestinian cultural identity everywhere is stronger than ever and proving to withstand all Israeli attempts of erasure. The emerging reality in Jerusalem combines an individual pragmatic approach at the bureaucratic level with a strong collective identity at the cultural and political level. Left alone, the Palestinians in Jerusalem are defining themselves.

Keywords

Jerusalem; integration; identity; culture; peace process; annexation; residency; civil rights; Hebrew; divided cities.

Since 1967, the population of Palestinians in Jerusalem has quadrupled, from less than one

hundred thousand persons to approximately four hundred thousand today. They have long maintained strong social, economic, and political ties with their fellow Palestinians in the West Bank. Over the past fifty-six years, Jerusalem residents have been in the vanguard of the Palestinian national movement, their political identity crucial for establishing a future Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, there seems to be a changing dynamic that has gone unnoticed or deliberately ignored.

In the summer of 1967, immediately after the war, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics conducted a census in East Jerusalem, including the Old City and its surrounding areas, revealing that sixty-five thousand Palestinians resided in the newly annexed eastern part of the city.¹ These Palestinians were granted the status of permanent residents, and not citizens, of Jerusalem, which Israel declared to be its capital, in breach of international law. Palestinian Jerusalemites were given some civil rights; under Israeli jurisdiction, people were ordered to pay taxes in exchange for social services and health care, and allowed access to civil courts and basic educational services. The Palestinian Jerusalemites were denied political rights, barring them from voting rights in Israeli national elections. Furthermore, the Israeli security apparatus continued to treat the Palestinians in East Jerusalem as a security threat, subjecting them to close surveillance and control, military harassment, collective punishment, and police violence.

The residency status was symbolized by a blue ID card (compared to the orange IDs for Gaza and later green IDs used in the West Bank), essentially granting Palestinians in East Jerusalem the right to move around the country more freely. Although their status was not equal to that of Israeli citizens, it provided for more rights than were accorded to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

This classification system effectively divided the Palestinians into three levels of limited privileges and rights: Palestinians in Israel proper (citizens), Palestinians in Jerusalem (permanent residents), and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (neither citizens nor permanent residents, but subjects under military law). For East Jerusalemites, the blue identity card is important to protect and maintain, since it indicates their right to reside in their ancestral home city of Jerusalem.

Although categorized as “permanent residents” under Israeli law, there is nothing permanent about the status of East Jerusalem Palestinians. Jerusalemites are regularly summoned by the Israeli Ministry of Interior to reconfirm their central connection to Jerusalem, a process that requires showing extensive documentation – tax records, rental leases, utility bills, payroll slips, and school records. Failure to provide all requested documentation can result in the revocation of residency, forcing individuals or families to relocate to the West Bank. Since 1967, Israel has consistently expanded the criteria for revoking residency status, leading to at least 14,500 Jerusalem IDs withdrawn and residency revoked.²

The revocation of Jerusalem residency is part of Israel’s wider “quiet deportation” policy, which includes the absence of approved zoning or expansion of Palestinian towns within Jerusalem, house demolitions, and restrictions on

building permits. At the same time, illegal Zionist settlement expands in the city, and land continues to be confiscated under the pretext of “public use,” meaning for exclusive Jewish use. The explicit desire of this policy is to “maintain a solid Jewish majority in the city,” as stated in the Jerusalem municipality’s master plan (Jerusalem Outline Plan no. 2000). Although initially limiting the percentage of Palestinians to below 30 percent of the city population, this was later considered unattainable, and so amended the ratio was amended to 60 percent Jews and 40 percent Palestinians.³

Despite two intifadas and a peace process, little has changed regarding the daily systematic discrimination against Palestinians. In the West Bank and Gaza, a bureaucratic proxy system was introduced for issuing identification cards, seemingly under the Palestinian Authority, but effectively under the Israeli Ministry of Interior, which controls the population registry for the entirety of people between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

Politically, Palestinians in East Jerusalem have always considered themselves as part of the West Bank, the whole of which was occupied by Israel as a result of the 1967 war. Palestinians in Jerusalem have cautiously supported the two-state solution, with East Jerusalem as the future capital of the State of Palestine based on the 1949 armistice or Green Line. Nevertheless, recent developments such as the demise of the two-state solution, the failures of the Palestinian Authority, the Trump administration’s change in U.S. policy toward Jerusalem, the Abraham accords and the normalization of relations between some Arab countries and Israel have led Palestinians to reevaluate their position.

With physical barriers separating them from other Palestinians in the West Bank, Palestinian Jerusalemites are increasingly aligning themselves with the more accessible Palestinian citizens of Israel. This new camaraderie is not artificial or psychological but rather a tangible social, economic, cultural, and potentially political realignment.

This shift should not be regarded as strange or surprising. Palestinians in East Jerusalem are relatively small in number (around four hundred thousand),⁴ and such a community will seek a larger ecosystem for social connections and economic trade, as well as communal and cultural relationships. Due to Israel’s well-developed road and transport system, it can be easier for Palestinians in Jerusalem to travel to Haifa, 150 kilometers to the north, than to make the journey through checkpoints to Ramallah, a mere fifteen kilometers away.

Not only is movement easier, but so is the exchange of goods. It is common to find produce from Jerusalem in Palestinian-owned shops within Israel and vice versa. Under the reality of occupation, as specified in the Paris Protocol (the specifications for economic relations under the Oslo accords), Jerusalem and Israel fall within the same tax zone, sharing the same tax codes.⁵ On the other hand, trade with the West Bank requires additional tax and invoicing procedures, making it complex and less desirable.

In education, movement restrictions hindering access to Palestinian universities in the West Bank and the non-recognition of many degrees offered by these universities

have led many young Palestinian Jerusalemite students to choose Israeli academic institutions for their higher studies. The website of Hebrew University, conveniently located just north of the Old City of Jerusalem, reports a steady increase in the number of “Arab” (never “Palestinian” which would recognize their nationhood) students, rising from 7 percent in 2004 to 14 percent in 2019.⁶ The number of Palestinian students in Israeli academia continues to grow exponentially. Hadassah Academic College (one of the more popular academic institutions in Jerusalem) is boasting its increasingly diverse student body, including “Arabs,” also on their portal.⁷

Naturally, college campuses serve also as social spaces where young people interact and form relationships. Personally, I have observed a noticeable increase in “mixed” marriages between Palestinian Jerusalemites and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Three out of the last five weddings I attended were of this nature. Various factors contribute to this trend; limited social interactions with Palestinians from the West Bank due to the physical separation (annexation wall and checkpoints) and the near impossible laws surrounding family unification (so that partners from opposite sides of the Green Line find residing together both legally and physically challenging). In March 2022, the Israeli Knesset approved a law that extended the ban on the unification of Palestinian families, by prohibiting the interior minister from granting residency or citizenship to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip married to Palestinian citizens of Israel.⁸

A new trend within the East Jerusalem community is the increasing enrollment in Hebrew language courses. Of the many studies that have attempted to examine the motivation behind this, most agree that primary motivations are practicality: improved communication with authorities in order to access information and services more effectively, and the pursuit of better employment opportunities within the Israeli labor market, where knowledge of Hebrew is an asset if not a requirement. Neither participation in Israeli cultural life, nor an appreciation for Hebrew literature and poetry were motivating factors for learning the Hebrew language. The Arabic language remain the center of Palestinian cultural identity, regardless of the language spoken with authorities during the workday, used for paperwork or the nature of their job, Palestinians in East Jerusalem value their expertise with and celebrate the Arabic language, at home, in schools, in culture and in media, and at every social gathering.

As someone involved in organizing cultural events and author appearances, I frequently design itineraries that link events or create series of events between Jerusalem and cities like Nazareth and Jaffa, easily visited within a day. On the other hand, arranging and executing events in the West Bank can be time-consuming and often frustrating. The city of Haifa serves as a striking example of a city reviving its strong Arabic art and culture life, and links with Jerusalem’s cultural scene are obvious for those willing to look.

But how do things appear from the perspective of a Jewish Israeli sitting in a trendy café in West Jerusalem? One can witness thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Palestinians from East Jerusalem daily making their way toward West Jerusalem

for work, to seek services from governmental institutions, to attend schools, and even to shop. Observers may perceive this as a sign of normality, that things are “working out,” or even argue that there is a slow process of Palestinian integration with Israel. On the contrary, relations are far away from any form of genuine integration or assimilation, and neither the Israeli public nor the Israeli government are actively seeking integration. The articulation of Israel as a “Jewish state” is a constant reminder to Palestinians that policies are designed to maintain them as “the other” in all aspects and sectors of the society. In 2018, the Israeli parliament approved the Nation-State law, which grants exclusive national self-determination rights to the Jewish people, effectively relegating Palestinian citizens of Israel officially to second-class status in a Jewish state.⁹ It is not hard to argue that Israeli racism has strengthened Palestinian unity and wholeness.

The majority of Palestinians in East Jerusalem have no desire to integrate into Israeli society, and understandably so. Why would they seek to belong to a system that has displaced, dehumanized, segregated, and oppressed them? Nevertheless, many strive to improve their personal status, by seeking equal rights and resisting oppression and discrimination – perhaps some are navigating to attempt to effect change from within, in some measure.

One of the schizophrenic practices Palestinians have honed over the past seventy-five years of fragmentation is the ability to switch between celebrating their cultural identity and maintaining the bureaucratic identity that was imposed on them. Historically, the Palestinian people have been scattered under various political realities, which has been a dividing factor, yet, their culture has served to express, encourage, and solidify their sense of one peoplehood. Palestinian cultural identity reaffirms Palestine roots, but it is also reflected in art, music, literature, values, food, traditions, language, and religion. The strong affiliations Palestinians are forging with their brothers and sisters inside Israel is a form of assertion of their cultural belonging to the wider Palestinian nationhood.

According to current data released by the Israeli Ministry of Interior, 5 percent of Jerusalemites, about nineteen thousand persons, have applied for and successfully obtained Israeli citizenship since 1967.¹⁰ This decision should also be understood as an individual, practical choice for security within roiling political dynamics rather than a change of political or cultural affiliation.

Palestinians in East Jerusalem are fully aware of the existential dilemmas of their fellow Palestinians within the Green Line, who may hold Israeli citizenship but are attached to the Palestinian struggle. They demonstrated their political consciousness and activism during the revolt in May 2021 in protest of the takeover of Palestinians houses in Shaykh Jarrah. Tens of thousands took to the streets to demand the lifting of the siege on the people of the Gaza Strip, and to object to the restrictive conditions on worshippers at al-Aqsa Mosque during the month of Ramadan.

It is undoubtedly an early stage of a new pattern of behavior, individually driven and without orchestration, but representing a significant number of individuals, so much so that it appears as a collective movement. But one need only consider the

weakness of the Palestinian national project, and the lack of leadership in Jerusalem to understand that this is purely an individual endeavor.

The question remains: Will this trend lead to any political transformation? Will the 5 percent of Palestinians in Jerusalem who are now holding Israeli passports participate in Israeli national elections? Will they attempt to represent themselves politically, possibly through a nationalist joint list? Or will this lead to a new political party adopting Jerusalem in its name or its political manifesto? Perhaps the most important question of all is asking to what extent the Palestinians in Jerusalem are learning from the political experiences of their fellow Palestinians inside Israel? The Palestinians in Israel have been involved in political work within the Israeli political and civil institutions for almost eight decades. Study of their successes and failures is imperative for those advocating a similar political engagement from Jerusalem.

That is precisely why Palestinian Jerusalemites are cautious about how far they are willing to extend their “pragmatism.” Israel’s Ministry of Education and its Jerusalem Municipality, which have been alternately strong-arming and incentivizing schools in East Jerusalem to drop the Palestinian curriculum, in favor of the Israeli/Zionist one, have managed only moderate success.¹¹ In contrast to the alarming increase in murders in Palestinian towns in Israel due to criminal networks with alleged protection from police, Jerusalemites continue to respect the strong traditional social law system, where disputes between individuals or families are settled with community participation. Nor are security forces including the police able to recruit Palestinians from Jerusalem.

Since the annexation of East Jerusalem, Palestinians in East Jerusalem have boycotted participation in municipal elections. Despite steady Israeli urging (often coming from center-left Israeli institutions) for the Palestinians to participate, less than 2 percent of eligible Palestinians in Jerusalem voted in the last election.¹² This is particularly thought provoking when we know that 5 percent of Jerusalemites acquired Israeli citizenship! While the Palestinians want to improve their individual status, they are careful not to weaken the collective. After fifty-six years of occupation, Palestinians know very well that a vote in the Jerusalem municipality election may be a vote for better services, but also a step in assimilation, a sign of integration, while their fight is about collective political national recognition. At the same time, the Israeli government has obstructed Palestinians in Jerusalem from active participation in Palestinian elections, in contrary to the agreed agreements.

If Palestinians in Jerusalem transform their political platform and their liberation struggle from the long-standing demand for a separate capital in an independent Palestinian state, to a struggle for equal and civil rights, it will undoubtedly undermine the Palestinian national project for a Palestinian state along the 1967 Green Line and East Jerusalem as its capital. The corner stone securing this project is in the hands and minds of Jerusalemites, and they are starting to have second thoughts about this.

But such a shift would also endanger the Israeli national project based on the notion of Israel as a Jewish state and Jerusalem as its capital. A reality in which

almost 40 percent of Jerusalem’s population consists of politically active non-Jewish Palestinians (some holding Israeli citizenship), a fight for equal civil rights in the capital of this Jewish state would shake not just the way the city sees itself but the whole of Israel – the country can’t be Jewish if the capital is not.

While political leaders on both sides, and the wider international community in the background, failed to bring about any real progress in the last two decades, people are taking the matter into their own hands. Regardless of our judgment on the political correctness of such undertakings, we must understand the wider consequences of such actions in reshaping the conflict for the years to come.

It has long been argued that Jerusalem is a microcosm of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Whatever happens in Jerusalem will have repercussions throughout the entire country, and the success or failure of any model will extend beyond this city. Dividing Jerusalem into two would facilitate the division of the country into two states, whereas maintaining an interconnected city would reflect an interwoven country. Israel’s annexation of Jerusalem (or its “unification,” as Israel terms it) back in 1967 was the first step toward annexing the whole of the West Bank. The one-state model could either be realized or prove unworkable in Jerusalem.

The political conflict will eventually compel the actors to focus on a realistic and achievable political framework, one that can only succeed if it includes a systematic process of decolonization. Only then can we pave the way for a viable comprehensive solution. Perhaps the first call for this process is coming from al-Quds.

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