

Jerusalem Report- April 2008

The fieldtrip focused on the research modules J1 (“Impact of the Separation barrier”) and J2 (‘Holy City/Holy Places’). The research within J1 focused on three broad areas indicated by the phenomena observed: privatisation and security; mobility and new spatial formations; and institutional support and emerging new structures. The research of J2 focused on the emerging themes of Israeli Settler appropriation of Palestinian old city properties, the politicization of cultural heritage and archaeological excavations and the spatial practice and interaction of religious communities around the holy places. Data was drawn from visits and visual surveys of contentious sites, such as Al-Wad Street and the public interface surrounding the Damascus Gate, the ongoing renovation and excavations of the Ohel Yitzhak synagogue and recent Settler acquisitions in the Burj al-Laqlaq district. Time was also given to examine sites on the periphery of the city and to assess the impact of the separation barrier on communal interfaces, population movement and economic life. Primary research also included 16 interviews with a wide range of Israeli and Palestinian academics, activists and social actors, as well as international analysts and commentators.

Privatisation is in various ways – security, historic sites, tourism, transportation – altering relationships between Palestinians and Israelis. Moreover the barrier has had unexpected ramifications in increasing certain sectors of the Palestinian population and transforming micro-economies. Palestinian Jerusalem is now effectively severed from its West Bank hinterland and much of the city’s sphere of political and cultural influence no longer exists; we are investigating 3 resulting shifts in gender balance and, in lieu of any other authority, a new emphasis on religious institutions and familial structures. On the Israeli side, the continued conflict has been at least partly responsible for depletion of the secular population and an upsurge in religious and ultra-national institutions and infrastructure. Our findings indicate that in both Palestinian and Israeli Jerusalem, the struggle for national territory carries a religious face.

Our research suggests that within Jerusalem’s Old City, the political impasse and current intransigence has contributed to the increasingly religious nature of social confrontations. Jewish settler groups are continuing to strengthen their presence through buying property in Muslim and Christian quarters, and by employing security guards to patrol their Yeshivas and newly acquired homes. Settlers are asserting themselves on the urban topography by flying Israeli flags from rooftops and balconies, positioning armed sentinels at vantage points and strategic entrances and demarcating neighbourhoods and properties through religious graffiti and political posters. Their presence is both stimulating property prices yet contesting the use and appropriation of common public space, such as routes to religious sites, intersections, rooftops and market spaces. Palestinians on the other hand are turning to modes of resistance manifested by extremely well-attended prayers at the Haram al-Sharif, the branding of streets and walls with Islamic symbols and graffiti, and the re-emergence of traditional family structures, including specially built centres (diwaniyya). These visible practices are not merely new forms of protest but are symptomatic of a society seeking protection, security and identity in family structures and religious values.

With regards to the contentious area of archaeology, a variety of sources expressed concerns over Israel's Antiquities Authority's (IAA) close relationship with right wing settler groups such as El-Ad. A formal petition has been signed by many leading academics, both Israeli and International, protesting against the politicisation of archaeological practice, in particular the El-Ad-controlled 'City of David' archaeological park in Silwan, where excavations have been used as a pretext for dispossessing Palestinian residents and consolidating Settler communities. Within the Old City, fears are similarly being raised over the renovation of the Ohel Yitzhak Synagogue in the Muslim quarter, which has become a site for excavation and the scene of a new tunnelling controversy, with rumours of it being directly linked to the Western Wall tunnel. Both sites reveal the inherent danger of cultural heritage becoming a political tool for enforcing religious agendas and their accompanying vision of transformed urban realities.

Finally, a recurring theme of our interviews concerned speculation over the details of a new Jerusalem 'Master Plan'. Sources emphasized various possible aspects of the proposed scheme: a demarcation between Jerusalem's visual basin and historic basin; an urban borough structure; and the construction of green 'buffer zones', encircling the old city walls. Alongside these proposals, are the discussion of a UNESCO 'Action Plan' aimed at protecting and restoring the cultural and historic legacy of Jerusalem's three religious communities. Any such plans, if realized, will undoubtedly have an important impact on the dynamics of Jerusalem's holy spaces.