

Modern Displacement of Palestinians in Yaffa

By Salah Muhsin*

On 14 May 1948, the city of Jaffa fell; of the close to 100,000 Palestinians who had lived in the city until that time, less than 4,000 remained. The people of Jaffa were congregated into the Al Ajami neighborhood, which was enclosed with a wire fence, and strict military rule was imposed on them. In 1949, the military rule over Jaffa was lifted and in 1950 Jaffa was annexed to the municipal borders of Tel Aviv, to create a unified "Tel Aviv-Jaffa" municipality.

Under Israeli law, all the homes, properties and land from which families from Jaffa were displaced were transferred to the so-called "Custodian of Absentee Property". In addition, responsibility for the management of these houses, apartments and commercial buildings was shifted to governmental companies. These companies leased the homes and apartments as cheap public housing to those regarded under Israeli law as entitled to public housing. They included a large portion of the Arabs of Jaffa who had lost their homes during the war.

In the first years after the Nakba, the Israeli authorities attempted to increase the Jewish population in the city. Accordingly, it directed the new immigrants to Jaffa, and tried to make a Jewish city. At the outset, this policy succeeded to attract tens of thousands of Jewish citizens who resettled in the city's old neighborhoods, often in homes belonging to Palestinian refugees displaced during the Nakba. In some cases the authorities divided the large Arab houses into a number of apartments and housed several families in them.

It was not long before the new immigrants started to leave the city for other locations in Israel, as a result of the great negligence by the authorities that Jaffa suffered from, in addition to the lack of good jobs and the low standards of living and services. Thus Jaffa gradually became a group of poor neighborhoods with high levels of crime and drug abuse.

Despite the high rate of natural population growth among the Arabs of Jaffa and the waves of migrants to Jaffa from Arab villages in the Triangle and the Galilee during the 1950s and 1960s, in search of job opportunities in the central region, the municipality did not provide additional accommodation in the Arab neighborhoods, as it did in the Jewish neighborhoods, leading to a severe housing crisis.

Arabs were not granted the right to move to adjacent neighborhoods for several reasons, most important of which was the fact that other neighborhoods had a Jewish majority that was often hostile to them. In addition, in certain cases Arabs were not afforded the opportunity of buying houses there because the apartments were designated to those who had served in the army, new immigrants, religious Jews and other Jewish sub-sectors. Furthermore, the more distant neighborhoods did not provide necessary services to Arab citizens, such as Arabic language schools and places of worship.

Until 1985, residents of Jaffa were prevented from making any changes to the buildings in which they lived. The municipality's planning and building authorities did not issue any permits for new homes, additions to existing houses, or even for renovations, causing a large number of homes in the old Jaffa neighborhoods to become dilapidated, with some verging on

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collapse. With no possibility of obtaining any kind of permit for home additions or to build new homes, and without any solution for young couples and natural population growth, a new phenomenon began to appear, that of adding new rooms to existing homes or building new homes without the necessary licenses. Another phenomenon was moving into empty houses in the city, which are today owned by governmental housing companies. This became known as the "house raiding phenomenon".

Families living in a severe housing crisis were often separated from an empty, derelict home by a wall that could be easily removed, or even by a closed door. The suffocating pressure prompted people to "break into" and make use of these buildings. In many cases there were no objections to these "break-ins", and today the residents remain in these houses and rooms, which became an integrated part of their homes and lives. Often, family members remain unaware that the house in which they were born and raised was not legally theirs, and was considered "state property", as the authorities later claimed.

In the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Jaffa witnessed a new architectural and real estate movement: gentrification. Over time, increasing numbers of Jewish citizens came to live in Jaffa to escape the high population density in Tel Aviv and in search of beautiful homes overlooking the sea. This interest led to a sharp rise in land and real estate prices in Jaffa, especially in the old neighborhoods besides the sea. Apartments that had hitherto been neglected and abandoned obtained a high economic value. Consequently the apartments the Arab residents of Jaffa had entered and the plots of state-owned land on which unlicensed homes had been built were coveted by many bodies. In recent years governmental housing companies and the Israel Land Administration (ILA) took an inventory of all sites of unlicensed building, as well as the apartments, rooms and storage areas that had been "raided" in Jaffa, which amounted to close to 500 sites.

Governmental companies imposed high financial penalties on "intruders", who were often unable to pay them. The companies then gave the home owners an ultimatum: either pay the fines or face eviction from the house, which could be sold in a public auction. Initially, the governmental housing companies gave first priority to the owners in purchasing the house, but this was generally unrealistic given the high prices of the homes. If this was the case the companies offered the house for sale on the free market and it would generally be bought by capitalists and private companies, who would often demolish them and construct buildings containing several luxurious apartments in their place. These apartments would then be sold on the open market for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and while Arab citizens were allowed to submit tenders for purchasing the house, in most cases they were not financially able to do so.

Luxurious apartments in two or three-storey buildings are almost the only kind of construction that is currently permitted in Jaffa. This kind of construction, which is taking place on lands where Arab homes had stood, fails to alleviate the housing crisis of Arab residents of Jaffa, whose number today stands at almost 20,000. Thus, the Al Ajami and Jabbaliya neighborhoods and the Old City are slowly being transformed from lively but poor Arab residential areas to wealthy Jewish neighborhoods.

At first sight this process may appear to be legal, logical and non-discriminatory, as it applies equally to all, Arabs or Jews alike. Any person who broke the law and built a home without a license or broke into an apartment or room of which they were not the legal owners must pay the owner, i.e., the governmental companies and the ILA. However, the demolition and

eviction orders are issued on homes inhabited by Arab families, while the vast majority of those buying the new, luxury homes built on the ruins of demolished Arab homes are Jews. The Israeli authorities claim it is "the laws of the market" that govern this process. However, these laws, at least in this case, are not blind, but result in the expulsion of Arabs from their homes, and their replacement by wealthier Jewish citizens.

The housing crisis and its consequences are not the only pressures forcing the Arabs of Jaffa out of the city; municipal taxes and the cost of renting homes are rising continuously and residents are being required to pay the high cost of land fees in the area. This, coupled with the inferior level of services and education available in Jaffa, the high rates of crime and drug abuse, and the scarce employment and development opportunities have made Jaffa an unattractive place for the Arab residents. This is particularly the case as the Jewish citizens who come to live in Jaffa are not part of the Jaffa community; they come to Jaffa merely to enjoy its picturesque landscape.

To sum up, the current state policy towards Jaffa is leading to an increase in the number of Jewish residents in the neighborhoods close to the sea, and to a simultaneous fall in the numbers of Arab residents. Even if it is not an openly declared policy, what is happening on the ground is the silent deportation of the Arab residents of Jaffa, in particular from the old neighborhoods of Jaffa close to the sea, from beautiful Jaffa.