

# A Vanishing Heritage



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Emek Shaveh

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Written by: Dr. Ramez Eid, the Open University

English Translation: Jessica Bonn

Graphic Design: Lior Cohen

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Emek Shaveh is an Israeli NGO working to defend cultural heritage rights and to protect ancient sites as public assets that belong to members of all communities, faiths and peoples.



**The Arab Culture Association (ACA)** is an independent non-profit organization. Established in 1998 aiming to strengthen Arab culture and identity for Palestinians in Israel. The ACA is known for its pioneering programs that address several cultural fields.

The Association's many popular programs, activities and publications have contributed to the preservation of national and cultural identity, especially among youth, and in affirming the position of the Arabic language.

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## Introduction

How do places evolve into heritage sites? The process of selecting a site for the World Heritage List or for a local heritage list in a given country entails an assessment conducted by an official body according to prescribed criteria and values. Sites defined as “heritage sites” are classified in a heritage register.

The process of officially including an artifact, place or practice in a heritage register given that it represents a particular heritage does not only entail physical conservation but also the construction of an official heritage agenda. Heritage sites are subject to specific directives regarding the manner in which they must be preserved, in distinction from other sites. Across the globe it is expected that official sites will be subject to conservation funded and administrated by the government, local administrations or other authorities.<sup>1</sup>

Heritage sites embody a diversity of meanings, values and functions in the lives of communities who either live in their vicinity or possess cultural and historical links to a site. These are deeply influenced by the manner in which a country and its authorities promote the development of a site and its heritage. These sites – official national heritage sites and World Heritage Sites – illustrate that at least from a cultural standpoint, they fulfill a role not only in the lives of local residents, but also embody cultural meaning on a national or international level. These multiple significances are a testimony to the symbolic importance of heritage sites, which also makes them a likely arena for debate over who has the right to determine access to and management of a given heritage site. Indeed, in many cases, the official and the local compete over the symbolic interpretation of a site’s heritage. As such, heritage may be defined as a dynamic process which entails continuous contestation between competing versions of the past, which in turn influence different understandings regarding the ethical and legal rights these interpretations grant to specific identity groups in contemporary society.<sup>2</sup> Generally there are two kinds of processes through which heritage is constructed:

1. Top-down – The state classifies and promotes certain places as the embodiment of regional, national or international values that comprise and construct official heritage.
2. Bottom-up – The relationship between people, objects, places and memories is the basis for constructing informal avenues for preserving heritage, usually at the local level.

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1] S. Labadi and C. Long (eds.), 2010. *Heritage and Globalisation*, London and New York: Routledge

2] W. Logan, M. Nic Craith and U. Kockel (eds.), 2016. *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.

Another aspect of heritage practices is the shaping of a conservation agenda: Which layers in a site should be conserved and which should be discarded? Which should be perpetuated, and which should be relinquished? Which memorial sites should be established, and which should be demolished? Which buildings should undergo conservation, and which should be replaced with new structures? This aspect of heritage brings into focus the processes of constructing society’s collective memory – we make use both of heritage artifacts (art objects, historical structures, sights, landscapes), and heritage practices (languages, music, the memorializing of communities) in order to shape our ideas about the past, present and future.<sup>3</sup>

In order to clarify the distinction between heritage artifacts and practices, we can examine the various perspectives through which heritage is conceived, since there are many forms of official classification that can be applied to heritage around the world at the national level. It is sufficient to conceptualize heritage as a field consisting of many lists as the impulse to catalogue heritage is one the central characteristics of the field.

Most people have a sense of what heritage is – even if they cannot define it - and will note the existence of a particular official heritage that may be incompatible or even clash with their individual or collective identity.<sup>4</sup> A visit to a national museum, for example, may entail a confrontation with a sense of the alienation from the artifacts and the collective history they represent. In other words, official heritage is necessarily a partial and selective heritage. The gap between what the individual understands to be his or her heritage and the official heritage promoted and managed by the state reveals the possible existence of multiple heritages for a particular cultural artifact.

In recent years, Arab society in Israel has been trying, with the meager resources at its disposal, to revive its built heritage. To our dismay, and as this report reveals, the state has not assisted this endeavor, and has rarely included its heritage sites in its official lists<sup>5</sup>, which are, as stated, an important aspect in shaping heritage. Rather, the state has generally ignored sites important in the eyes of the Arab public in Israel, neglecting them and refraining from offering monetary or administrative support for their conservation.

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3] L. Smith, 2006. *The Uses of Heritage*, New York: Routledge.

4] D. Lowenthal, 2009. *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5] Take for example the “[Landmarks](#)” Program within the Ministry of Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage.

## Arab Society in Israel

The Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel today comprise 21% of the population. At the end of 2019, 1.9 million Arabs lived in Israel (including approximately 300,000 in East Jerusalem with resident, non-citizen status), of a total of 9.1 million citizens and residents. Most of Israel's Arabs are Muslim (83%), and others are Christian (9%) and Druze (8%). Approximately 55% of the Arabs in Israel live in the north, in a number of regions of the Galilee; some 18% live in an area known as "The Triangle"; some 11% live in the northern Negev; some 4% in East Jerusalem; approximately 12% in mixed cities (e.g. Haifa, Ramleh, Lod).<sup>6</sup>

The history of the Arab population since the establishment of the State of Israel is the story of a majority group of local inhabitants who suddenly became a demographic and sociological minority. Such a situation, in which a majority is turned into a minority, is not rare, and in international law these residents are considered "natives." In contrast to immigrant minorities who chose to leave their countries and resettle in a foreign land, native minorities lived in their homeland prior to the political changes in the area (border changes, establishment of a new state, or the merging of states), which took place in a unilateral fashion, without their consent. The Palestinian-Arab minority in the State of Israel is a local, indigenous minority that seeks unique collective rights, as is accepted in democratic countries around the world. In Israel, the relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority are particularly complex, due to the ongoing conflict between the two peoples and due to Israel's definition as a Jewish state – a definition the essence of which is not entirely clear but whose very articulation is alienating to its Arab citizens.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the Arab heritage sites in Israeli villages and cities, or in cities that were predominantly Arab until 1948, were built during the period of Ottoman rule, which lasted for 400 years and ended during World War I. Many structures built during that period, particularly during the 18th and 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, are still scattered across many localities. While Ottoman rule left a weak social and cultural legacy in the Middle East as a whole, the Arab residents of Palestine successfully developed large modern cities at the end of the 19th century, characterized by a flourishing trade network, especially when compared to other regions in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Of note, for example, is the revival of two cities

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6] Demographic characteristics, [Website of the Central Bureau of Statistics](#).

7] I. Kaufman, M. Kahba and Y. Boimel. 2014. *Arab Society in Israel*, Raanana, Open University Press.

8] N. Rouhana and A. Sabbagh-Khoury (eds.), 2011, *The Palestinians in Israel: Readings in History, Politics and Society*, Haifa: Mada al-Carmel

– Haifa and Acre (expanded on below) – during this period. Until the mid-19th century, Haifa was a small, poor village in the shadow of the city of Acre, capital of the area and its center. However, once a new rail line which linked Damascus to the Hejaz railway was built in proximity to Haifa, it underwent rapid change. The German Colony (along what is today Ben Gurion Street) was established at the end of the 19th century by a group of German Templars, and over a period of fifty years the neighborhood grew, Arab neighborhoods were built, and the number of residents in the city multiplied six-fold.

During the British Mandate period (1922-1948), the Jewish population in Palestine expanded by a factor of ten, totaling approximately 650,000 people, mainly due to waves of immigration. The Arab population doubled, and in 1947 numbered approximately 1.4 million people, of whom, 800,000 lived in an area within the boundaries of the future State of Israel (the Green Line). In the 1948 War, the situation changed; the majority of the Palestinian Arabs living in the area included within the boundaries of the State of Israel fled or were expelled during the war, and the Israeli government decided to prevent their return. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs who had been uprooted from their lands became refugees. Within the boundaries of the new State of Israel, only 160,000 Arabs remained. During this same period, hundreds of thousands of Jews from around the world arrived in Israel, and the proportion of Jews to Arabs was inverted: The Jews became the majority, approximately 85% of the total population, and the Arabs became a minority of approximately 15%.<sup>9</sup>

During the war, heritage sites and buildings were demolished, and many of the Arab neighborhoods and localities were either destroyed or emptied of their residents. Most researchers estimate that during the war, close to 500 Arab villages were destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

### Transfer of Ownership over Portions of Built Heritage

The discussion about Palestinian-Israeli built heritage is informed by historical processes which have led to the transfer of Palestinian-Israeli owned sites to state ownership or administration, and the potential inherent in the control and management of these sites. The following are a few examples:

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9] B. Kimmerling and J. Migdal, 2003. "Odd Man Out – Arabs in Israel" in *The Palestinian People: A History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press

10] Rouhana and A. Sabbagh-Khoury (eds.), 2011 (see note 7, above); Kimmerling and Migdal 2003 (ibid.).

1. Lands within the jurisdiction of the British Mandatory government, under the High Commissioner (and not privately owned) were transferred, to the State of Israel after its establishment.

2. In 1950, the Absentee Property Law came into effect, facilitating the transfer of property that belonged to those defined by law as “absentees” to the state. An absentee is anyone who was the owner of property in Israel and relocated to territory that was under the control of an enemy country, i.e. an Arab country. Even those who left their homes during the fighting and moved to a nearby village or hid out near their homes (whether they left willfully or were expelled) were declared absentees. These are also known as internal refugees. The land and homes of the absentees who left them during the war were transferred to the Custodian of Absentee Properties, and later to the Development Authority, from where they were once again transferred, this time to the Israel Lands Administration.

3. Most of the lands that were administered by the Islamic Waqf were also declared as absentee property. These properties included historical lands and buildings that had been administered by the Waqf, including cemeteries and public institutions.

### **Lack of Planning in Arab Localities**

Since the establishment of the state, no new Arab locality has been established (with the exception of Bedouin towns in the Negev). Existing Arab localities grew (without any masterplans) around cities, towns and villages which had been in place prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. The result is an acute shortage in available areas catering for population growth in Arab society. The lack of planning schemes for the existing Arab localities drives many people reluctantly to construct illegally.

The result is also disastrous for conservation: without masterplans and detailed plans for each locality, heritage sites cannot be zoned and specifications for legal and illegal construction at the sites cannot be stipulated or enforced.

## **Arab Cultural Heritage in the Galilee: Haifa, Acre and the Villages**

In August 1999, the government of Israel ratified the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Israel’s National Commission for UNESCO, established to implement the convention, comprises representatives from government offices, public bodies and authorities and academic institutions. In practice, while the commission indeed develops and preserves heritage sites – Jewish, Crusader, and others – it expresses little interest in the built heritage of the Arab public in Israel.<sup>11</sup>

At the national level, another body, the Council for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel, is a semi-official non-profit organization, vested by the Israeli government to be its partner in creating the list of heritage sites in Israel for preservation. It has advanced preservation in Israel for decades, yet, its activity is carried out mainly in Jewish localities in Israel, and focuses usually on Zionist sites; a very small number of the heritage sites that it develops belong to the Druze community. The lack of Arab heritage featured during Heritage Preservation Week – the Council’s main annual event focusing, predictably, on Zionist sites – is a clear example of the state authorities’ ongoing neglect of Arab built heritage in Israel and its role in failure to promote education about it.<sup>12</sup>

In order to understand the unique characteristics of Arab heritage sites in Israel and its concomitant challenges, we will present case studies of localities that feature Arab heritage sites worthy of preservation. These case studies constitute a preliminary survey that may promote an understanding of the historical context for these built heritage sites and the developments that have had an effect on the various buildings and localities since 1948. A substantial portion of this built heritage was damaged in the war or abandoned and destroyed for one reason or another over the years. The case studies intend to illuminate the policies that lead to the neglect and erasure of this heritage and the vast potential these sites still retain for a more complex understanding of the development of the region. We will demonstrate that vis-à-vis the intentional damage caused to the Arab heritage sites in these localities, it is also possible to discern bottom-up activities that are initiated by local communities, private individuals or non-profits, in an attempt to protect and preserve these heritage sites. Therefore, despite the somewhat pessimistic tone of the present report, we

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11] See for example the [list](#) of tentative and official UNESCO World Heritage Site in Israel.

12] E. Zandberg, May 10, 2018, “Heritage Preservation Week Ignores Arab Heritage” (Heb.), *Haaretz*.

believe that there is much that can be salvaged and that there are many ways to act towards the goal of bequeathing Arab heritage in Israel to the coming generations.

The overview of built heritage in the localities presented below are all in the Galilee and were selected according to three perquisites: (1) Existing conservation activity for heritage sites (with or without results). (2) The potential for future collaboration with the head of the local authority or its members based on preliminary research between January-August 2020. (3) The existence of an ancient village core and structures that may serve as the basis for monitoring and future conservation.

## Haifa

One conjecture regarding the name “Haifa” is that it derives from the Aramaic word “Keiphah” (rock), given to the city for its rocky cliffs overhanging the sea. Like other mountains in the Galilee, this topography earned it a religious status throughout its history. The Crusaders called the area “Caiphah,” apparently due to the influence of its Arab name, Haifa.<sup>13</sup> As a coastal city in the north, Haifa, particularly since the end of the 19th century, absorbed immigrants from the region and from overseas. In the early 20th century, its population numbered approximately 10,000. By 1948, this number had grown to 120,000. Today, more than 250,000 people – Jewish and Arab – live in the city.

Since the early Christian period, Haifa has been an important city to a variety of religions and cultures. In the Christian tradition, Jesus and his family passed through Haifa on their return from Egypt before resettling in Nazareth. The streets of the Old City are dotted with churches commemorating this visit. During the Islamic period, Haifa was an important port city with defensive walls built to protect it. At the beginning of 1100, the city fell to the Crusaders, who controlled it for 87 years, until it was conquered by Saladin. A few years later, the Crusaders reconquered the city, retaining control until 1291.

In the Mamluk period, the city fell into neglect, and became a small village, while the neighboring Acre held a more important status. This changed only much later, during the period of the autonomous rule of Zahr al-‘Omar in northern Palestine (1756-1775) who

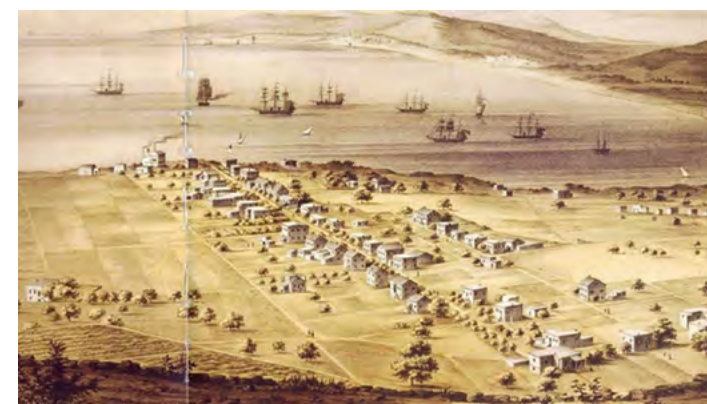
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13] For the section we relied on interviews with experts on Haifa, and on the following references: J. Mansour, 2007. *Paths in the History of Haifa*, (Haifa: The Association for Cultural Development) (Heb.); J. Mansour, 2015. *Haifa: A Word that has Become a City* (Pictorial History). Haifa: al-Arqaan (Arabic); T. Goren 2007, *History of Haifa* (Haifa: Haifa University and Haifa Municipality) (Heb).

initiated new construction in the city, destroying part of what was known then as “the Old City of Haifa” and building the “new Haifa,” three kilometers southeast of the “Old City”. Al-‘Omar surrounded it with a wall, erected three watchtowers, and buildings, including the government palace (*Saraya*), *al-Hasba*, and the *an-Nasr Mosque*. Although Haifa was a small city during al-‘Omar’s rule, it achieved a cosmopolitan status after it opened its gates to Arab and foreign residents. At the end of the 18th century, Haifa was conquered by Napoleon’s forces on their way to Acre, and at the beginning of the 19th century, it was controlled by Ibrahim Pasha, the son of the Egyptian ruler at the time, Mohammad Ali. The main construction boom in Haifa occurred during the 19th century and first half of the 20th century.



Haifa’s railway station from the late Ottoman rule.



The German Colony in Haifa end of the 19th Century<sup>14</sup>

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14] A. Carmel, 2002. *The History of Haifa under Turkish Rule*. Haifa: The Gottlieb Schumacher Institute for Research of the Christian Contribution to the Development of 19th Century Palestine in the University of Haifa, p. i20 (Hebrew).

The following is more detailed information about the neighborhoods in Haifa that feature the city's main historic buildings:

- **Al-Balaneh**

One of the first neighborhoods built outside the city walls during the rule of Zahr al-'Omar. In the center of the neighborhood is the al-Istiqlal ("Independence") Mosque, built during the Ottoman period, considered to be one of the important mosques built in Palestine during that period.

- The residential buildings in this neighborhood were built during the first half of the 20th century, particularly since 1920, in a style that combines modern influences with an Arabic tradition of building with local stone. The neighborhood and main thoroughfare that traversed it served as an important commercial vein due to the fact that it linked Haifa to other important cities such as Nazareth, Acre, and other central cities in the region such as Damascus and Beirut. The main railway station of the city (on the Hejaz Railway) was built in the east of the neighborhood, and large parts of the station remain intact.

Today, the neighborhood is neglected and is low on the socio-economic indices. The establishment of Ibn Gabirol Street in the 1950s led to the demolition of many of its historic buildings – some destroyed completely, and some partially destroyed. Most of what remains of them is not maintained, nor is there any conservation initiative or program to remedy this situation. The changes in the neighborhood's planning in recent years and the construction of towering retaining walls created additional derelict spaces which have become a nuisance for the neighborhood's residents.



Al-Balaneh neighborhood in 1930.<sup>15</sup>

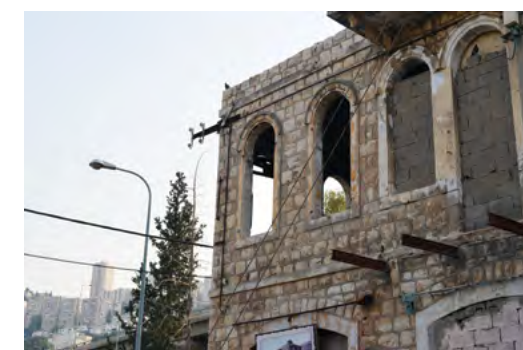
15] Palestinian Oral History [Maps](#).



Ibn Gabirol Street intersects the neighborhood



Al-Istiqlal Mosque  
(Source: Wikipedia, in Hebrew)



Dilapidated houses in the al-Balaneh neighborhood (photo: Yihya Abu Riya)

- **Wadi Nisnas Neighborhood**

One of the only Arab neighborhoods that was not destroyed in the 1948 War, and, therefore, preserves its Arab history and built heritage better than other neighborhoods in the city. After the war, the state forced most of Haifa's Arab residents to converge in the neighborhood, thereby sparing its built heritage from destruction. And yet, over the years, the state neglected the neighborhood, preventing original owners of the houses or their families from living in them. Many buildings there remain abandoned to this day. If immediate conservation measures are not implemented, these houses are likely to collapse.

The built heritage of this neighborhood preserves styles that are characteristic of early 20th century architecture, and they are a clear – if neglected – example of the unique architecture of the time including the use of local stone, the style of the doorways, and the color of the facades.

Some of the important buildings in the neighborhood include: the historic building of the *al-Ittihad* newspaper, one of the important newspapers in Arab society that has been in print continuously since the pre-state period; the structure where the poet Noah Ibrahim lived at the beginning of the 20th century; the home of Ahmad Dahbour, also a well-known poet; the headquarters of the communist party; the market (souq) area; St. John's Church; and St. Elias Catholic Church built in the 1930s.

#### • **The Halisa Neighborhood**

Located in Haifa's eastern side, the Halisa neighborhood includes a few houses built into the mountainside in the 1920s. They belonged to wealthy families from Palestine and Syria who had lived in Haifa, but the Haifa Municipality destroyed them in the mid-1980s. Nearby is the al-Hajj 'Abdallah Mosque. Built in 1932, the mosque is another example of the destruction of Arab built heritage in Israel: In the 1948 War, Zionist militias shelled causing partial damage. For decades after, neither the state nor the Haifa Municipality repaired the damages. According to Mansour<sup>16</sup> and other residents of Haifa, only private conservation initiatives bore fruit, and it has been re-opened for activity for the past twenty years, albeit official support and aid are necessary for its conservation.

On the western side of the neighborhood is Wadi Rushmiyya, an area once rich in water sources, where one can still find the remains of a Roman-Byzantine fortress renovated in the 18th century during the period of Zahr al-'Omar. Unfortunately, this corner of history has also been neglected, and is not included in the municipal conservation plans or in city tours.

#### • **Old City of Haifa**

This neighborhood, built by Zahr al-'Omar in the 18th century, includes fortifications and a surrounding wall. As noted above, while al-'Omar called the neighborhood "New Haifa," today it is known as the "Old City." Most of its historical portions were destroyed in the Shikmona Operation in the early 1950s, initiated by the Haifa Municipality with the goal of erasing the Palestinian-Arab identity of the Old City.<sup>17</sup>

16] J. Mansour, 2015. *Haifa: A Word that has Become a City* (Pictorial History). Haifa: al-Arqan (Arabic)

17] J. Mansour, 2007. *Paths in the History of Haifa*. Haifa: The Association for Cultural Development (Heb.).

Al-Kamra Square, in the center of the Old City, is named after the Palestinian-Arab family that built many buildings around it, but in the 1950s the city changed the name to Paris Square, in flagrant disrespect for the heritage and history of the place.

The western part of the Old City is known as "the churches neighborhood," due to the many churches there, including St. Louis the King Cathedral (built at the end of the 19th century), and the St. Elias Church (built in 1867). The al-Jarina Mosque, which was the main mosque in Haifa during the Ottoman period, was also damaged during the shelling in 1948. Beside it is the Clock Tower, built during the Ottoman period (in 1901) to mark 25 years of Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II's rule.

The ongoing neglect of Haifa's Palestinian-Arab heritage is most apparent in the Old City. For example, the an-Nasr Mosque, Haifa's oldest mosque (built by Zahr al-'Omar in 1764) was damaged in a series of vandalism incidents, and parts of it were destroyed. Today, it is still standing thanks to young people who volunteer to protect it and help with renovations. And yet, neither the municipality nor the state see fit to conserve this important historic building.<sup>18</sup>



The an-Nasr Mosque and Clock Tower, both from the Ottoman period  
(Source: Wikipedia, in Arabic)

18] Haifanet Reporter. 7.12.17. "[A historic achievement with the completion of the restoration of an-Nasr Mosque in Haifa](#)", Haifanet (Arabic).



- **Wadi Salib**

One of the most neglected neighborhoods in Haifa. In 1948, all of its Arab residents were expelled or fled, and many structures have remained abandoned to this day. For decades, the city has not advanced any plans for saving its rich assortment of built heritage sites. Rather, it has promoted the demolition of Arab buildings with the goal of preventing the return of the original residents.<sup>19</sup> In recent years, state authorities have issued new tenders for the sale of historical homes in the neighborhood, and some houses have changed their zoning from residential to commercial. As a result, the neighborhood is in the process of losing its unique character and architectural appeal.



Abandoned homes in the Wadi Salib neighborhood

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19] J. Mansour, 2007. *Paths in the History of Haifa*, (Haifa: The Association for Cultural Development) (Heb.); J. Mansour, 2015. *Haifa: A Word that has Become a City* (Pictorial History). Haifa: *al-Arqa* (Arabic); T. Goren 2007, *History of Haifa* (Haifa: Haifa University and Haifa Municipality) (Heb).

- **Hammam al-Pasha (Turkish baths)**

Built during the Ottoman period, at the beginning of the 20th century, Hammam al-Pasha served as a focal point for social gatherings for the residents of Haifa. The Hammam continued to function until the 1970s, after which it became a night club, and more recently, a restaurant. It appears that parts of the building were altered or destroyed. To preserve the building would require significant conservation efforts.

In conclusion, the modern city of Haifa is rich in history as witnessed by its built heritage from the Ottoman and British Mandate periods, which has survived the destruction prior to and after the 1948 War, including intentional attempts at effacement, such as the Shikmona Operation. It would be fitting for the municipality and state authorities to set new objectives to save Haifa's history and built heritage, and halt plans to change the nature of its historic neighborhoods.

### **Acre**

Most of the residents of Old Acre are Palestinian Arabs. From the standpoint of the city's built heritage and its conservation, a grim picture emerges. Archaeological excavations reveal that the ancient settlement of Acre is located at Tel al-Fuhar, or Napoleon Hill, as the municipality insists on calling it, east of today's Old City.<sup>20</sup>

Acre flourished for 4,000 years, particularly during the Roman and Arab periods, and for a brief period, was the capital of the Crusader state. Zahr al-'Omar rebuilt it in the 18th century, and during his reign it was one of the most important cities in Palestine and in the Levant. The Old City is home to seven mosques and five churches – a testimony to the culture and religious brotherhood throughout the generations.

Acre's Old City is one of the most impressive historic cities in the Mediterranean Basin. It is also the only Arab city that has remained on the Mediterranean Coast within the Green Line in Israel. It is teeming with activity and life, and its market is still in operation, despite the economic challenges and changes in the consumer habits of the 21st century citizen, and thanks to its residents, who continue to insist on their right to maintain its unique heritage. The residents preserve the glory of the same ancient city that Napoleon Bonaparte failed to conquer in 1799, and of which was said:

“If I would have taken Acre... I would have made my soldiers... into a sacred battalion – my

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20] N. Shur, 1990, *History of Acre*, Jerusalem: Dvir.

immortals. I would have made myself emperor of the east...”<sup>21</sup>

Many coastal cities expanded and developed economically in the 19th century in the region. In Acre this period was characterized by the construction of mosques, bath houses and inns (“khans”). Wealthy merchants settled in the city and built estates and homes in the Eastern neo-classical style of the late 19th century; many of the structures established since the period of Zahr al-‘Omar were situated atop earlier built layers, as in other historical cities around the world (for example, Jerusalem’s Old City); and the city’s impressive fortifications continued to be developed by Acre’s local rulers after Zahr al-‘Omar. Remnants of the ancient water supply system established during that period can still be found throughout the city.



Map of Acre’s Old City (Source: Wikipedia, in Hebrew).

Approximately 55,000 people live in Acre today, one-third of whom (18,000) are Arab. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, Acre is usually rated in cluster 4 out of ten in the Israeli socio-economic indices. Like other cities and villages in the Galilee, the average salary in Acre is well below the national average of ILS 11,373. According to local activists in Acre, more than one third (approximately 38%) of the population in Old Acre suffers from neglect by state institutions, and lives beneath the poverty line.<sup>22</sup>

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21] T. Philipp, 2001. *Acre: The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian City, 1730–1831*, New York: Columbia University Press

22] M. Botser, 2006. [Acre: The process of city deterioration and recommendations for improvement](#). Jerusalem: Koret Milken Institute.

Residents of the Old City report that in recent years there has been a slight improvement in their financial situation, but it is still unnecessarily dire, given the city’s rich history, which has the potential of serving as a basis from which the city can develop and flourish. “A,” a resident of the city, stated in an interview with the author: “The city is interested in marketing Acre’s underground attractions, while the built heritage above it suffers from discriminatory treatment, particularly if it is Arab or Muslim.”

In 2001, after the State of Israel submitted a request for recognizing Acre as a World Heritage Site, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee officially declared Acre as a World Heritage Site. In the candidacy portfolio it submitted, the state committed to supporting conservation efforts in the Old City, in accordance with current international standards. Unfortunately, since that declaration, conservation policy for Acre’s built heritage has not conformed to the spirit of the declaration or to international law, as manifested in the international accords regarding conservation, nor with the standard directives stipulated by the UNESCO professional staff and adopted by the commission.

The state and its agencies had made a commitment to create a local system for real citizen participation of Old City residents in decisions relating to their lives and their heritage, as detailed in the articles of the declaration:

**Ten. Property management plan and statement of objectives**

3. Provision of a solution to the inhabitants in the fields of residential accommodation, environment, community services, infrastructure, employment and involvement of the public in the planning process.<sup>23</sup>

The state also determined that it would not apply pressure to promote development and construction in Old Acre:

**One. Development pressure**

Due to its unique geographical location the contact between the old city of Acre and the new city is limited, and the factor of development pressure does not constitute a problem.<sup>24</sup>

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23] The Conservation Department of the Israeli Antiquities Authority, 2001. *Nomination of the Old City of Acre for the World Heritage List*, UNESCO, p. 53

24] Ibid.

In our view, the plans for conserving Acre's built heritage do not comply with the above commitments. Following are a few examples:

- The Arab residents of Acre are not an essential party in decision making in all that pertains to the management of their city. Their representatives, religious leaders, community organizations, social activists and politicians, and other stakeholders, are also not part of a collaborative decision-making network. According to a few activists living in the Old City, such as Sami Hawari<sup>25</sup>, the system ignores them consistently, except for random participation by council members on issues relating to the Old City<sup>26</sup>.
- In recent years, the state and its authorities, including the Ministry of Tourism, the Acre Municipality and the Acre Development Authority, announced projects for tourism development for World Heritage site of Old Acre. According to the plan, new compounds will be built on Khan al-'Omdan and Khan as-Shuna – two of the most monumental historical sites in Old Acre built during the Middle Ages. Israel had previously declared that the sites would be conserved according to UNESCO's strict rules of conservation. Yet, according to the development plan, all the residents at those sites (who are Arab), over 200 people, will be evicted immediately, in order to make room for 300 hotel rooms in each of the Khan buildings and in nearby areas. In order to promote the plan, the authorities explained that the UNESCO declaration is what drew large investors to build the tourist hotels – and yet, ironically, the price of the development is the destruction of the medieval buildings, without which, Acre would not have been a candidate for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage site list in the first place. It appears that the status of Acre as a World Heritage Site has been exploited to advance tourism while leading to the neglect of structures of tremendous historic and cultural value. Moreover, the list of structures slated for destruction in Acre includes almost all of the important historic buildings in Acre:

1. Khan as-Shawarda: Plans to transform this Khan into a 60-room hotel requires construction that will completely alter the structure.
2. Al-Bustan area: A 60-room hotel is planned for construction there.
3. Khan al-'Omdan and Khan as-Shuna: Both will be converted into a 170-room hotel.

25] In an interview held on 14th May, 2020.

26] In Previous years, Parliament member, Mr. Basel Ghattas has complained to UNESCO about issues of neglect and the lack of citizen participation in Acre, see for example: Media Line, 24.5.15 Arab MKs: Acre Municipality Forcing out Arab Residents, [Ynet](http://ynet.com).

4. John the Baptist Church Compound: a hotel is planned.
5. Burj al-Qarim (Qorayyim Palace): Will be converted into a convention center and restaurant.
6. Area 54, which includes impressive vaulted halls from the Middle Ages: To become a "tourist activity center."
7. Old olive press: Planned to become a hotel
8. Laguna area in the Crusader compound: a 170-room hotel will be built.

It appears that the authorities responsible for the safeguarding and conservation of the architectural heritage of Old Acre, are in effect systematically and intentionally neglecting these important buildings in order to present tourism as the only possibility for preventing their complete destruction, which could have been prevented through conservation.

Evidence for the terrible state of conservation of Acre's built heritage since the city was declared as a World Heritage site are apparent when visiting sites such as Khan al-Umdan and Khan as-Shuna. Sections of the Turkish bath, since the 1970s, have been destroyed because residents have been prevented from maintaining and preserving them.



Example of planning and development trends of the Israel Lands Administration and the Acre Tourism Office.



Residents of Old Acre are fighting attempts to evict them from their homes.



The small bathhouse (Hamam) neglected and partially destroyed.

## Built Cultural Heritage in Galilee Villages

No one disputes the fact that most of the Palestinian-Arab villages of the Galilee preserve the core of the old village, or parts of it. They contain impressive structures that attest to a cultural wealth and the tradition of local stone masonry in the area, which residents use in a variety of ways, adapting to their daily lives. In order to understand the cultural heritage of the Galilee, it must be viewed in the context of life in historical agricultural villages and the connection between the architectural design of the house and the living needs of their owners. We have therefore chosen to present two types of structures found in Galilee villages:

**A.** Stone-walled structures whose arches are the supporting structure for the roof.

Until the end of the Ottoman period, such structures were built in all of the village cores in the Galilee. The roof itself was constructed in a few layers:

- A layer of large, thick branches was laid at intervals of 60-80 cm.
- A layer of thin olive branches formed an incline that prevents rainwater from entering.
- A layer of branches both supported the roof and protected the olive branches beneath.
- A 10 cm. layer of grey earth.
- A layer of mud to seal the cracks.

**B.** Buildings constructed in the 'aqd style (العقد) were built mainly from the 17th century through the mid-20th century. Their form is impressive and unique. The roof is an arch made of square stones, connected to a broad base at each of the four corners. Usually, the structure is constructed of large limestones, with the addition of clay and gravel, and the combination affords these ancient houses singular strength and stability. The stones were cut to a particular thickness – up to one meter – and served as insulation, keeping heat in during the cold winter days, and maintaining a cool interior during summer.

There are Arab villages where there are only a small number of individual homes with this structure in the village core, and others with many such structures. For example, in 'Ilabun, some 25 'aqd structures have been identified, but in the neighboring village of Bu'aina-Nujidat, we found only one such structure that survived modern developments. Among the residents of Bu'aina-Nujidat, this single structure

symbolizes a heritage that is gradually disappearing, and schools in the village organize a study day and field trip for each grade to visit the 'aqd, learn about its history and importance, thus integrating values that were integral to life during the period when such structures were still being built. Occasionally, internal tourists also visit the structure.

In Acre and Nazareth in particular, one can find a large number of 'aqd structures, and the growing awareness of cultural heritage values in recent years has led to many attempts by local residents to preserve them. Indeed, relative to the end of the 1990s, in recent years the demolition of such buildings has been declining. Despite this, buildings are still sometimes destroyed by their owners, due to the lack of legislation and procedural measures. Residents of the village of Kufr Kana relate that an 'aqd building was demolished in 2019 next to the main road of the village, and the local council and planning authorities in the area did not intervene to prevent it.



Typical 'aqd (vaulted structure) functioning as a residence in the village of 'Ilabun.

### **Demand for Recognition of the Heritage of Destroyed Arab Villages**

Cultural heritage should reflect the various aspects of the lives of a given area's inhabitants – tragic and otherwise. Amongst Arab society in Israel, there is a general demand to preserve the remains of the villages that were emptied out – whether due to expulsions or abandonment – in the 1948 War. There are hundreds of such villages in Israel. Researchers and non-profit organizations have accumulated extensive experience and knowledge about these villages in their work over the past decades, and in recent years, they have been joined by Israeli architects, anthropologists and archaeologists who have called for the preservation of these sites. For example, Shmuel Groag, a conservation architect, suggests to preserve the memory of 418 destroyed villages as a means to make amends to past wrong-doings, and allowing their presentation as “part of the country's shared heritage”.<sup>27</sup> Noga Kadman proposes that the conservation of the Arab heritage of Israel will serve as a stepping stone that will allow Israeli society to grapple with and challenge the distorted perceptions of Palestinian-Arab heritage and perhaps as a way of advancing reconciliation in Israel between the country's Jewish and Arab population;<sup>28</sup> many books dealing with memory, history and the heritage of these villages have been written by Palestinian-Arab researchers, but the state refrains from recognizing their importance.

27] S. Groag, 2006. “On Conservation and Forgetting,” Block 4, 33-37.

28] N. Kadman, 2015. *Erased from Space and Consciousness*, Indiana University Press.

## Summary of Local Policy on Heritage Conservation in

### Villages

Officials and interested parties with whom we met in villages in the Galilee in preparation for this report<sup>29</sup> all made a claim to the effect that there is an urgent need to preserve Arab heritage. When asked why they believe there is no organized activity for conservation, most answered that the state offered no support for such initiatives, and that all conservation and development budgets are allocated to Jewish or Zionist heritage sites.

The social activists we interviewed also complained that the overall conservation of historic buildings does not rank high on the priorities of the local authorities. Although one can always find one or two council members who seek to advance and formalize the preservation of built heritage, the latter often report that they tend to encounter many obstacles that prevent the promotion of these issues. Among others, they reported that owners of properties with historic buildings claim that due to a severe shortage in available land for the construction of new residential buildings, they are forced to develop houses slated for conservation. The owners of the historic building frequently prefer to build new houses for their children and do not cooperate with initiatives to preserve historic buildings, thus limiting their ability to develop them.

Of course, and as is known in other parts of the world, particularly in ancient and densely built villages, there exists a range of possibilities for action that local authorities can adopt in order to create an authorized framework for the preservation of culturally valuable buildings.

By way of conclusion, we would like to recommend several ideas:

1. Public participation and attentiveness to the problems and needs of residents. Without a sense of trust between the local authority and the homeowners it is impossible to advance long-term plans.
2. Devising creative solutions. For example, the local authority can offer the homeowners, in coordination with the planning authorities (and incorporating the directive in the locality's masterplan), transferability of development rights for the property in order to encourage them to prevent any destruction or change to the structures in their possession.
3. Plans for reinforcing the buildings from an engineering perspective (for example,

retrofitting for earthquakes) and their safeguarding together with a commitment by the local authorities to bear some of the expenses.

4. As stated in the fourth addition to the Planning and Building Law in Israel (1965), every local authority is required to establish a conservation committee for its geographical area. To our chagrin, only a few of the villages uphold the provisions of this law. As a result, residents cannot develop an essential local discourse on the topic of conservation. There are also committees that were established but have not been active and whose composition does not correspond to the provisions of the law. The Ministry of the Interior does not oversee the establishment of conservation committees in local authorities and does not possess current information as to whether they have been established. Of course, local conservation committees can spearhead far-reaching processes, in the form of by-laws in the area of conservation (for example, a by-law to compel property owners to renovate facades and preserve the buildings), thereby setting in place legal arrangements for the future. We recommend the establishment of such committees coupled with government oversight over the process.

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29] In interviews conducted between February to June 2020.

