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Acre and Lod - a Story of Neglect and Discriminatory Conservation

While fear and violence dominate the streets in mixed cities, the construction of the Mosaic Museum in Lod is nearing completion. The museum will be situated on the site of one of the most magnificent mosaics from the late Roman period in the country (3rd-4th century CE). The mosaic itself was unearthed in 1996, but only recently a donor was found to enable the construction of the museum at a cost of roughly 30 million shekels. The mosaic is located in the neighborhood of Ramat Eshkol in Lod, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city and at the center of the violence of recent days.

The Ramat Eshkol neighborhood borders the old city of Lod. Both neighborhoods are characterized by a mixed population with an Arab majority and Jewish minority. In the city of Lod at large, the majority is Jewish and a minority Arab. The old city of Lod was mostly destroyed in the 1950s with the exception of a few historic buildings that attest to the varied history of the city over hundreds of years.

Most of the streets in Ramat Eshkol have been given Hebrew names taken from Zionist history: Hagdud Ha'ivri, Hechalutz street (Pioneer Street), Ha'aliya street and more. The names stand in contrast to the neglect and composition of the population.

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The Ramat Eshkol Neighborhood in Lod, a tin shack with a sign "Good Luck Kiosk".



HaGdud Ha'ivri street in Ramat Eshkol neighborhood of Lod

Ostensibly there is no connection between the emerging mosaic museum and the politics and poverty which underly the violence rocking the neighborhood. Unlike many tourist sites, the Mosaic Museum is not even part of Lod's Jewish heritage - as it dates to the Roman polis, when the city was called "Diospolis".

In the heart of the Old City of Lod, a few hundred meters from the museum, the Lod municipality has undertaken a massive development project of the "Khan al-Hilu", a Mamluk era structure (13th-16th century CE), which was still in use until 1948 as the central market complex or the city. The plans include the construction of a large parking lot and the conversion of the khan into a commercial complex which will house cafes, arts and crafts centers and exhibition centers. Ostensibly, the development of the khan should benefit the entire population, especially as it will involve preserving Arab heritage. However, looking closely at the decision about what to preserve and, particularly, how to preserve, have left the Arab population feeling excluded from the process.

In the old city of Lod there are several buildings that have been slated for conservation. Examples are the Hasuna family's olive press, the Pool of Arches and more. Arab Lod which was destroyed in the 1950s was built on the site of the Roman and Byzantine city and remained consistently populated until the 20th century. The few archaeological remains such as the Roman-era mosaic, Mamluk structures and traces of the main travel routes attest to a city with a diverse past. Underneath the poverty, neglect and political tensions lies great touristic potential.

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Khan al-Hilu

Yet, the current approach towards touristic development in Lod excludes the residents who live in the neighborhoods around the sites and in practice appropriates the old city structures in an effort to turn them into cultural centers detached from their historical context and divorced from their cultural heritage. The tens of thousands of shekels that the municipality and state invest in Lod each year for tourism development essentially erases what little is left of the fascinating city of Lod between the 13th to the first half of the 20th century.

This process compliments efforts at demographic engineering in the city. In the 1990s, next to Khan al-Hilu in the heart of the old city, a group of Jewish national-religious Israelis moved into the neighborhood. The members of the community share a similar ideology and strong Jewish identity. Their goal is to enhance the Jewish presence in mixed cities. In many ways, these organizations function much like the settlers in East

Jerusalem. Although inside the Greenline the status of the Palestinian citizens of Israel is different to their East Jerusalem counterparts, and occasionally the religious communities in Lod even state their desire to work with all the sectors of society, in reality the new religious residents form closed communities who work mainly with the Jewish population in those towns, setting themselves apart from the social fabric of the city.

The national religious community of Lod works closely with the municipality. The later, for example, recruits volunteers (usually religious women during their national service) to work in the community center adjacent to Khan al-Hilu in order to familiarize them with the city's Jewish history.



The entrance to the complex where the national religious community lives near Khal al-Hilu

The use of tours marketing a historical narrative which emphasizes Jewish history and identity to sway public opinion in favor of a settlement is familiar from the tactics used by the settlers of the Elad Foundation since the 1990s in the City of David/Silwan in East Jerusalem. Over the years, Elad has perfected this approach and today a visit to the City of David as well as to other sites in an around Jerusalem's Old City effectively

welds historical narrative to the present-day claim for the Jewish people's historical rights to the sites.

If we look now at the case of the city of Acre, it may serve as a warning for the future of the residents of Lod. There are many similar processes taking place in both cities. In Acre too an Arab minority lives alongside a Jewish majority. In Acre too the Arab population lives in the Old City. Acre which was recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO has for many years now been used by the municipality to benefit business, rather than its residents. The residents of the Old City have been facing the threat of eviction for almost a decade. Old Acre, was rebuilt in the 18th century by Daher al-Omar, on the foundations of the Crusaders' city. The well-preserved Crusader ruins coupled with the Arab construction along the coast has rendered its old city one of the most beautiful in the country.

In the past two decades, the municipality has been advancing the development of Acre into a touristic city. The central narrative presented to the visitors is Acre as a Crusaders' city. Attractions such as the Templars' tunnel, the Crusaders' fortress and more are put center stage, although some of the tourist routes also include structures from the Ottoman period including government buildings such as the Saraya.

As part of the touristic development there are two processes taking place in parallel: 1. The construction of markets and hotels in the heart of the old city, and 2. An attempt to move the poor residents of old Acre from their homes in favor of a wealthier (some would say Jewish) population. An example for touristic development which either ignores or erases the old city can be seen in the decision to build a hotel in Khan al-Umdan (literally "khan of pillars"), which is located near the port and considered one of the largest and best preserved khans in Israel. The khan was built in 1784 under the rule of Ahmed al-Jazzar, and served as the city's main market from the 18th to the middle of the 19th centuries.

As in Lod, parallel to the touristic ventures, in the 1990s a community of national religious Jews settled in the city with the aim of "raising the flag to bolster the Jewish character of the western side of the city of Acre". As in Lod, the religious community works closely with the municipality to advance tourism with an emphasis on a Jewish narrative. In Lod, the community claims that it is working for the benefit of the local population, but in Acre they do not conceal their goals of strengthening the Jewish identity of the city.

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In Acre, the city's structures have fared much better than its residents. The old city which achieved World Heritage Site status and is considered one of the important tourist cities in the county, is also a poor city whose residents have experienced severe discrimination for decades. The touristic development which came with the UNESCO status did not improve their situation, as many of them are facing prospects of being removed from their homes. Perhaps then it is no coincidence that some of the violence we have seen in recent days in Acre have been turned against touristic sites.



Khan al-Umdan, Acre

In Lod, the process of erasure has been underway since the 1950s. The recent tourism projects are the latest installments in efforts to render Arab heritage into a touristic resource that ignores its historical context. The city of Lod thus erases once again the city's glorious heritage and views its Arab residents as a nuisance, instead of a population with strong ties to the city and worthy of investment.

There are many reasons for the violence we have seen sweeping through mixed cities. We view the consistent erasure of the complex past of the city not only as an historical

injustice but also as an injustice towards the present-day Arab residents of the cities and to the public as a whole. Violence is not the solution to grievances, but neither is the erasure of a glorious heritage and the transformation of structures such as Khans into arts and craft and leisure centers devoid of historical meaning. After the violence, there will be a need for mending and rebuilding. Community oriented preservation and development that works to strengthen rather than disenfranchise could be an opportunity to start building bridges. Highlighting the multicultural history of Lod and Acre, instead of further driving an already polarized society apart, could function as an excellent place to start sensitizing both Jews and Arabs to their shared heritage.

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