

Palestine's 'last village' faces the bulldozers

Lifta to make way for Jewish vacation homes

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Global Research, July 08, 2011

8 July 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

On a rocky slope dropping steeply away from the busy main road at the entrance to West Jerusalem is to be found a scattering of ancient stone houses, empty and clinging precariously to terraces hewn from the hillside centuries ago.

Although most Israeli drivers barely notice the buildings, this small ghost town — neglected for the past six decades — is at the centre of a legal battle fuelling nationalist sentiments on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide.

Picking his way through the cluster of 55 surviving houses, their stone walls invaded by weeds and shrubs, Yacoub Odeh, 71, slipped easily into reminiscences about the halcyon days in Lifta.

He was only eight years old in January 1948 when the advancing Jewish forces put his family and the 3,000 other Palestinian villagers to flight.

Over the coming months, as the Jewish state was born, they would be joined by 750,000 others forced into exile in an event that is known by Palestinians as the “nakba”, or catastrophe.

Despite the passage of time, Lifta's chief landmarks are still clear to Mr Odeh: the remains of his own family's home, an olive press, the village oven, a spring, the mosque, the cemetery and the courtyard where the villagers once congregated.

“Life was wonderful for a small child here,” he said, closing his eyes. “We were like one large family. We played in the spring's waters, we picked the delicious strawberries growing next to the pool.

“I can still remember the taste of the bread freshly baked by my mother and coated with olive oil and thyme.”

The village not only occupies a unique place in Mr Odeh's affections. It has also come to symbolise a hope of eventual return for many of the nearly five million Palestinian refugees around the world.

In the words of Ghada Karmi, a British academic whose own family was forced from their home close by, in the Jerusalem suburb of Katamon, Lifta “remains a physical memorial of injustice and survival”.

The reason is that Lifta is the last deserted village from 1948 still standing in modern-day Israel.

More than 400 other villages seized by Israel war were razed during and after the war of 1948 in what historians have described as a systematic plan to make sure the refugees had no homes to return to.

Ilan Pappé, an Israeli historian who examined the 1948 war in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, has termed the villages' destruction an act of "memoricide" — erasing for Israelis all troubling reminders of an earlier Palestinian presence.

The destroyed villages' lands were used by the new state either to build communities for Jewish immigrants or to plant national forests, said Eitan Bronstein, spokesman for Zochrot, an Israeli group dedicated to teaching Israelis about the nakba.

A handful of other Palestinian communities, such as the old city of Jaffa and Ein Hod near Haifa, survived the wave of demolitions but were quickly passed on to new Jewish owners to be reinvented as artists' colonies.

Only Lifta was neither destroyed nor reinhabited, its homes standing as a solitary, silent testament to a vanished way of life, said Mr Bronstein.

But even that small legacy is under imminent threat from the bulldozers.

In January the Israel Lands Authority, a government body responsible for Lifta's lands, announced a plan to build a luxury housing project over the village, including more than 200 apartments, a hotel and shops.

The project, said Meir Margalit, a Jerusalem city councillor, would be targeted at wealthy foreign Jews, mainly from the United States and France, looking for summer vacation homes in Israel.

The developers have promised to incorporate some of the old buildings into the complex, although most observers — including leading architects — say that little of the original Palestinian village will be recognisable after the project is completed.

Instead, according to Mr Bronstein, Lifta will belatedly suffer the same fate as the hundreds of villages destroyed by Israel decades ago. "The message is that we are finishing what we started in 1948," he said.

Esther Zandberg, a commentator on architecture for the Israeli Haaretz daily, agreed: "Although it is termed a preservation effort, it is in effect, paradoxically, an erasure of all memory of the original village."

Critics have been joined by Shmuel Groag, one of the project's original architects, who has accused the developers of failing to respect the basic rules of conservation in their treatment of Lifta.

Lifta's families, backed by several Israeli groups, including Rabbis for Human Rights, petitioned the courts to stop the project, saying the site should be preserved in its existing

state.

The Jerusalem district court temporarily froze the development in March, and is expected to issue a ruling in the coming days.

The families have also appealed to Unesco, the United Nations organisation in charge of educational, scientific and cultural matters, to declare Lifta a world heritage site.

The development, however, is backed by the leading conservation bodies in Israel, including the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel and the Council for the Preservation of Historic Sites. The council's director, Isaac Shewky, said the costs of a proper restoration would be "astronomical".

Unlike most of the other 20,000 refugees and their descendants from Lifta, many of whom live in the West Bank and Jordan, Mr Odeh is able to visit his former village because he lives a few kilometres away in East Jerusalem.

He said he would ultimately like to see the families offered a chance to reclaim their former homes. "We will never forget Lifta. Our dream is to come back."

Few observers expect such a scenario in the current political climate. The Palestinian right of return is widely seen by Israeli Jews as spelling doom for Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state.

That fear was only accentuated by the images of refugees in Syria storming border fences in the Golan Heights in May and June, in what was widely seen in Israel as an attempted return to their former homes.

Mr Bronstein said: "Lifta poses such a threat to Israelis because it offers a starting point for imagining how the right of return might be implemented. It offers a model for the refugees."

Mr Odeh, who offers guided tours of Lifta, has to share the site with many Israeli visitors. Young religious boys have turned the still-functioning village pool into a mikveh, or ritual immersion bath. Other Israelis use the site as a favourite hiking spot. And in the evenings, drug-users take shelter in the homes.

Lifta is also facing rapid encroachment from West Jerusalem. It is ringed by major roads linking Jerusalem to the West Bank settlements; on the ridge above, a high-speed rail link to Tel Aviv is being built; and in the valley below a military complex is believed to house the government's underground nuclear bunker.

Jonathan Cook won this year's Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

A version of this article originally appeared in The National (www.thenational.ae), published in Abu Dhabi.

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