

# Reconstructing Jerusalem through Tourism

By Marya Farah

As Jerusalem evolves, so too does its narrative and projected history. Beginning in 1948, changes to the composition of the city were accompanied by changes to place names.<sup>i</sup> Further changes were expedited and continue to transpire as a result of Israel's illegal annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967.

All cities evolve, as has Jerusalem, irrespective of the legality of or justification for the “evolution.” While the internal transformation has sought to achieve Israel's political and demographic aims, it has also sought to project an external narrative of the city – one targeted at foreign consumption through its tourism industry.<sup>ii</sup> This narrative not only seeks to put Israel's “best face” forward, it simultaneously recreates and ignores the history of Palestinians. The neighborhoods of Silwan, the Old City, and Nabi Samwil (in the J1 and J2 areas of the Jerusalem governorate) are emblematic of this practice.

## Silwan and the Old City

In May 2017, the Israeli cabinet held its weekly meeting in the Western Wall tunnels. During the meeting, the cabinet approved a plan to construct a cable car with one stop near Bab al-Magharba

(Dung Gate) near the Western Wall, formerly the Moroccan Quarter. The Israeli tourism minister stated, “The future cable car will change the face of Jerusalem, allow easy and convenient access for tourists and visitors to the Western Wall and will serve as an exceptional tourist attraction. There is no more appropriate and exciting time than this – 50 years since the reunification of Jerusalem – to launch this revolutionary project.”<sup>iii</sup>

Fifty years prior, on June 26, 1967, an Israeli cable, sent to delegations abroad, instructed Israeli diplomats “to present the annexation as no more than an act of ‘Municipal Fusion,’ meant to provide proper services to residents of Jerusalem and its vicinity.”<sup>iv</sup>

In reality, the proposed cable car will dramatically change the face of Jerusalem and will link together an Israeli narrative on the city absent of Palestinians. At the same time, the sites that the cable car will visit hold a hidden history of displacement that began in 1967 and continues today.

As mentioned, the cable car's main stop will be near the Western Wall. On June 10, 1967, Arab residents of the Moroccan Quarter were given 2 hours to vacate their homes, and by the following day, Israeli forces had flattened 135 homes.<sup>v</sup> Hundreds were displaced. The Western Wall Plaza was built where these homes once stood.

Although the exact location of the



View of Jerusalem from the south, with the village of Silwan in the foreground. Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

Here you have two statements, decades apart, which ignore the reality of illegal annexation and instead use similar innocuous language to serve the same tale: “reunification” and “municipal fusion” – “easy and convenient access” for tourists and “proper services” for residents.

cable car stop near Dung Gate was not specified, past reports have mentioned that it may be at the Kedem Center settlement site in Silwan. Notably, when the plan for Kedem was approved in 2012, a complex built by Silwan residents that included a playground, community center, and



Nabi Samwil.

café, was demolished to make way for the site.<sup>vi</sup>

The Kedem Center is also near the City of David, another settlement site that will benefit from added tourists brought by the cable car. The City of David is in the Wadi Hilwa area of Silwan, most of which was declared part of a national park in 1970.<sup>vii</sup> In 1976, the Jerusalem Municipality declared Wadi Hilwa a “special open area” and prohibited “construction of residential or public buildings in the area.”<sup>viii</sup> Faced with no other choice, Palestinian residents there, as throughout East Jerusalem and Area C, build “illegally” and face demolition.

#### Nabi Samwil

“I daresay there is nowhere in Palestine...or in the entire world...a sight like Nabi Samwil.”<sup>ix</sup> *Description by a pilgrim from 1884, as quoted by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.*

Nabi Samwil stands on a strategic hilltop and holds expansive views of Jerusalem; however, the real “sight” is the paradox found within the Palestinian village itself. The historical center of the village surrounded the mosque that is believed to contain the tomb of the Prophet Samuel. In 1971, Israeli forces entered Nabi Samwil and forcibly removed the Palestinians who lived near the mosque. No prior warning was given. Individuals were then transferred to another area of the village a few hundred meters away, to the abandoned homes of Palestinians who had fled during 1967.

Excavations near the mosque began under the Israeli Civil Administration in 1992, and in 1995, Israel declared the entire area a national park.<sup>x</sup> The presence of a Palestinian village is obscured to visitors by both the landscape and the absence of any reference to Palestinians in Israeli tourism information.<sup>xi</sup>

In reality, the designation of the village as a national park, coupled with the establishment of the Annexation Wall and neighboring settlements, impose an array of restrictions on residents that aim to make their lives as difficult as possible. Isolated from the rest of the West Bank by the Wall, the majority of residents, as West Bank ID holders, may not enter Jerusalem without permits, although no physical barriers exist. Similar to Silwan, building restrictions force residents to either live in dilapidated housing or build “illegally” and face demolition. Between movement, access, and building restrictions, every aspect of life is impacted – ranging from education to where to establish a family.

Israel’s policies and practices towards the Old City, Silwan, and Nabi Samwil, along with the narratives that accompany them, are emblematic of other cities and villages throughout historical Palestine. While perceptions are subject to influence, the reality of the situation remains. Amongst the tourists who visit, some individuals will undoubtedly deviate down the main road of Nabi Samwil and discover a Palestinian village. Others will research the City of David and discover the countless articles written on the targeting of Silwan and its residents. Palestinians continue to exist as does the actual history of the city.

<sup>i</sup> Only two of the countless examples include the changing of Mamilla Cemetery to “Independence Park,” and Talbiyeh to “Komemiyut.”

<sup>ii</sup> In 2016, nearly 3 million tourists reportedly visited Israel (a figure which likely does not differentiate between visits to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem). See “Tourism to Israel up 3.6% in 2016,” *Globes*, January 9, 2017, available at <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-tourism-to-israel-up-36-in-2016-1001171126>.

<sup>iii</sup> “Israeli Cabinet meets in Western Wall tunnels, approves Old City elevator,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 28, 2017, available at <http://www.jta.org/2017/05/28/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/israels-cabinet-meets-in-western-wall-tunnels-approves-old-city-elevator>.

<sup>iv</sup> “It should be described as an act of Municipal Fusion, rather than annexation,” *Akevot*, June 26, 2017, available at <http://akevot.org.il/en/article/municipal-fusion/?full>.

<sup>v</sup> “The Moroccan Quarter: A History of the Present,” Tom Abowd, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, available at <http://www.palestine-studies.org/jq/fulltext/78159>.

<sup>vi</sup> “Israel Approves New East Jerusalem Visitors’ Compound, Razes Palestinian Community Center,” *Haaretz*, February 13, 2012, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-approves-new-east-jerusalem-visitors-compound-razes-palestinian-community-center-1.412700>.

<sup>vii</sup> “Jerusalem Walls National Park,” B’Tselem, July 28, 2015, available at [http://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/national\\_parks\\_jerusalem\\_walls](http://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/national_parks_jerusalem_walls).

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> “Nabi Samuel Park,” Israel Nature and Parks Authority, available at [http://parks.org.il/sigalit/DAFDAFOT/nabi-samuel\\_eng.pdf](http://parks.org.il/sigalit/DAFDAFOT/nabi-samuel_eng.pdf).

<sup>x</sup> “Nabi Samwil: A Village Trapped in a National Park,” *Emek Shaveh*, September 13, 2013, available at <http://alt-arch.org/en/nabi-samuel-national-park-2/>.

<sup>xi</sup> See, for example, “Nabi Samuel (The Tomb of Samuel),” Israel Tourist Information, <https://info.goisrael.com/en/nabi-samuel-the-tomb-of-samuel-65971>; Nabi Samuel National Park, Israel Nature and Parks Authority, available at <http://www.parks.org.il/sites/English/ParksAndReserves/nabisamuel/Pages/default.aspx>.