

The Reign of the Rabble

Organized Crime in Jerusalem and the West Bank

By Ali Qleibo



want the old days back again and they'll never come back, and I am haunted by the memory of them and of the world falling about my ears."

Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*

"What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof?—I wish I knew... Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can..."

Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Jerusalem, Jenin, and Nablus are living a historic moment that we can tell our grandchildren about – how we saw the gradual collapse of Palestinian culture. The passing away of our traditional customs and value system – the Palestinian ethos – has created a state of anomie. In the major urban centers, where the influence of clan and tribal solidarity is minimal, the nuclear family's sense of security is severely undermined by systemic organized crime that seeks, through extortion, violence, and murder, to take over these ancient family holdings. Sporadic shooting, intimidating Molotov bombs, and the setting on fire of cars and houses have become rampant not only in Arab Jerusalem but all over Palestine.

Each city is a case on its own: Jenin and Nablus are plagued with gangs that take shelter in impenetrable "neighborhoods" of both cities. In Jerusalem, Palestinian scavengers, thugs, "carpetbaggers," and fortune hunters have taken over and hold the real estate owners and shopkeepers in terror. In Jerusalem, Palestinian organized crime is further aggravated by the lackadaisical Israeli execution of the law and represents a grave threat to the survival of patrician Jerusalemites in the Holy City.

Chaos thrives. Caught between the two evils of Israeli occupation and Palestinian organized crime, we live in fear of the imminent threat of the loss of our own lives and homes. The prime targets are our intangible social heritage and the families associated with the tangible architectural heritage. The monetary value of the family homesteads in the ancient cities and of the land holdings in the countryside owned by traditional but absentee landlords has become inflated. Here, the profiteers, opportunists, and carpetbaggers have found a fertile territory to carry out their systematic criminal operations and land seizures.

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aggravates our daily lives, resulting in the almost total collapse of the Palestinian social order. The troubled situation has degenerated to such an extent that the individual is no longer secure, either with respect to his family or to his property. The violence that is erupting between competing militias, on both the family level and within the political structure, has created a state of lawlessness and chaos that permeates the major cities. This chaos is symptomatic of the disintegration of the social fabric and is corollary to the persistence of the traditional system of inheritance. Centuries-old inherited properties remain collectively shared, thereby creating a conflictual situation



Grand Mosque, Jenin. Photo by George Azar.

among the beneficiaries. In this stressful context, social solidarity has been replaced by isolated individuals who live in atomized, socially disintegrated communities that are vulnerable to organized crime.

The extortions levied on business owners, shopkeepers, and restaurateurs – intimidation ranges from kidnapping, shooting, the throwing of incendiary bombs, and other various forms of violence – thrive unabated. Despite the frequent recurrence of this phenomenon, from the north of Palestine to Jerusalem and branching eastward to the Jordan Valley, the individual families, out of sheer fear, try to resolve the problem quietly. The subject is taboo. The daily press does not report the reign of terror. References are scarce, as NGO human rights observers concern themselves exclusively with reporting Israeli transgressions. Only two sites, both foreign, barely allude to the

problem: *The Monitor* and a website in Arabic, *Al Hiwar Al Mutamadden* الحوار المتمدد. The issue of Palestinians victimizing fellow Palestinians remains a discursive lacuna and an overlooked phenomenon. Palestinians generally live in denial. Despite the frequency of the crimes, each is perceived as a singular exceptional case and dismissed as an aberration.

The usurping of a property takes two major forms: either by rental or by purchase of a fraction of the property from one of the heirs. Once the land or property is rented, a first payment is advanced, but once the new tenant moves in the rent money stops and the land or house is de facto appropriated. Similarly, once a fraction is bought, the owners are intimidated and extorted to sell cheaply the rest of the real estate. This situation is further complicated by the massive emigration abroad of the Jerusalemite, Nabulsi, and Jenini gentry consequent to the *Nakba* and *Naksa*, which has left isolated and helpless those left behind, a phenomenon

paralleled by the flood of migrants, outsiders who move to the cities as blue- and white-collar laborers. In the new social context, a state of chaos prevails where traditional values and conventions are no longer binding. There are no checks, no inner compunctions, and no control. Common courtesies, discretion in conduct, have dissipated to be replaced by the pragmatic craving to amass wealth. The forsaking of traditional family and social values is fuelled by jealousies, hatred, and spite, which are endemic to Palestinian society.

In the new, atomized, highly individualized Palestine, it is “every man for himself.”

The complex problematic is embedded in the traditional system of property inheritance and coupled with the erosion of family ties and the absence of a centralized political system. Inherited real estate, which comprises most Palestinian national heritage buildings in the

major cities, is neither liquidated after the death of the grandparents (who have inherited these properties) nor are the benefits distributed equally among their heirs. As *waqf* (Muslim endowments), the buildings in the cities and the huge country estates define the inheritors as mere beneficiaries who can neither sell nor transform the existent structure. Moreover while some members of the family continue to live in the properties, others, with equal rights, must find their own resources elsewhere. A more complicating factor emerges through the historical fact that most patrician families had already moved to the urban suburbs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their ancient family homes in the cities have been taken over by migrant workers who are protected tenants. Conflict ensues once these tenants or a family member sells, as key money, the part in which he lives or which he has inherited. Such a practice is often the case with settlers, but the right can be sold to the Palestinian gangs who use it as a legal way to take over an entire property that is collectively shared. In Jerusalem, the pattern applies to the properties north of Herod's Gate and Damascus Gate, Sheikh Jarrah, and Wadi el Joz.

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The idea of selling shared inherited properties is anathema. Transforming family heritage into real estate and into cash is psychologically devastating. It is an irreducible element of our identity. The Hebronian adage, "With money one generates more money," بالمال يتحیی المال, is unacceptable in Jerusalem. The mansions in Jerusalem or Nablus, our tangible architectural heritage, are perceived as family heirlooms that delineate one's pedigree, family tree, and status. The social history of Jerusalem, the intangible heritage, strikes deep roots in a network that is formed by centuries of marriages and objectified in these buildings. The patriarchal system passes the male's family name to the children, but these properties reveal the intricate social web that is woven through the female

line, of which the inheritance of a share in a property is an objective expression.

Al-Sheikh Muhammad al Khalyly, the great scholar of the eighteenth century who has bequeathed Jerusalem numerous major endowments, is a prime example. His seven daughters married into the seven patrician families of Jerusalem. These marriage alliances mixed with blood relations makes all Jerusalemites kinspeople, related as eighth- or tenth-degree cousins. What the patrilineal name hides becomes visible in the inheritance of beneficiary rights from the mother's side. In this respect, women form the underlying social structure of kinship that forms the special history of each city and are objectified in the endowments, which by law can be neither sold nor exchanged nor substantially altered. By

extension, even private properties that are not endowments have assumed the same sacrosanct status.

Until recently, the income distribution and residency rights in these properties, or part of them, were arranged by the senior members of the families. The tradition was upheld as long as the old social order survived. The arrangements, ratified by our great grandparents, were followed by the second generation and deferred to by the third, but they are no longer binding for the fourth generation. Social disintegration, modernity, the rise of individualism, and the collapse of the old political order have created a new rabid individualism.

There is a proverb that conditions Palestinian self- and other-consciousness, in which the other is invariably constituted as enemy. One sees oneself as necessarily in conflictual relation with one's brother, with the patrilateral cousin, and against the outsider. The sense of solidarity comes from the negative precept that we are all enemies. انا على اخوي وانا واخوي

على ابن عمي وانا وابن عمي عالفريب, roughly translated: I against my brother, my brother and I against our cousin, and my cousin and I against the stranger. This hostile attitude belies great hatred that is endemic to the structure of the family unit and provides a fertile ground for jealousy, envy, and spite. The spiteful desire to see the others lose what they seem to enjoy is a major driving force in interfamily rivalries fired by inheritance squabbles.

Real estate is the way to launder money...but it is also the means used to make money. Once a family member – out of sheer spite, hatred, and vindictiveness – decides to sell at lower-than-market value the portion of which he is a beneficiary, the buyer begins to encroach on all the property. The court cases are lengthy and the executive power is limited. But once the gang puts its feet on the property – through extortion, threats, shooting, Molotov bombs, setting cars on fire – the intimidation process escalates to coerce the rest of the heirs who share the major portion of the property to sell. Legal documents are frequently forged. Houses are often broken into with the aim of procuring original documents, deeds to properties and lands. Twenty years ago, in Jerusalem, the Muslim court, المحكمة الشرعية, where the archive of all the endowments and deeds are preserved, was broken into and all the documents were carried



Chaos and violence have escalated recently to an unprecedented level both in the West Bank and in Jerusalem. Caught between the two evils of Israeli occupation and Palestinian organized crime, we live in fear of the imminent threat of the loss of our own lives and homes.

away as a preamble to the systematic takeover of Jerusalem's real estate. The clandestine Israeli Palestinian partnerships in property crimes come to surface in everyday talk.

Some analysts believe that the state of lawlessness in the urban centers is rooted in the first Intifada when kidnapping, murdering, vendettas, and extortions were exercised in the name of the revolution. Hasan Shaheen, in *Al-Hiwar al-Mutamadden* (الحوارات المتعددة), argues that prior to the hoodlums' and gangsters' association with the first Intifada and the second Aqsa Intifada, the Palestinians had already become hostages to the revolution pretenders and the criminal gangs that bullied and extorted the Palestinians. The audacious author explains that the Palestinian Authority had sought from the very beginning to build its security system by enlisting a disproportionately high number of employees in relation to the number of Palestinians. Furthermore it granted these militias a wide range of freedom to first of all provide security to the authority itself and to provide security to Israel and the settlements. The security and stability of the Palestinians was not on the agenda.

Hasan Shaheen further writes that the Palestinian Authority had initially employed the thugs and bullies (الزعران والبطلجية) by enlisting each group as a militant unit under the guise of "national resistance" within the Palestinian security system. The integration of the criminal element with the Palestinian security system took place in Gaza before the Hamas/Fatah division and in the West Bank until it reached its climax when Kaddura Musa, the mayor of Jenin, was murdered by these groups. The ensuing chaos, الفلتان الأمني, is generally attributed to the absence of a centralized hierarchical political structure. The political parties are in conflict with the armed militias that clash with the traditional tribal system and with the local armed gangsters who were employed by Fatah during the first Intifada. Invariably, explains Shaheen, we find that the personnel of the Palestinian security ministry are members of the armed militia. At the same time these same individuals and their weapons are at the service of the family and clan, and from these are formed the local criminal gangs.

The current situation is reminiscent of the 1940s when the Jerusalem western suburbs, such as Qatamon, were under constant attack by the Jewish terrorist groups. The neighborhood, represented then by Khalil al Sakakini, asked Abed al Qader al Hussein to send volunteers to protect them. Soon enough, these same nationalist fighters started to rob and loot the houses, and molest the women. Khalil al Sakakini writes in his diary that he went to ask that they be removed. Instead, Hussein sent two men to guard the neighborhood. The two gallant men, father and son, much beloved by the residents, were shot by Zionist terrorist groups. Following their deaths, Qatamon was left without protection. It took a few months before the final fall of Qatamon and the western suburbs.

The use of the rabble by the Palestinian leadership was a grievous error, the consequence of which was the fall of most of Palestine in 1948. The same mistake was to be repeated by Arafat.

Today, violence in Nablus has risen to an unprecedented pitch as criminals who still walk around the streets without being prosecuted are subjecting shops to gunfire at night. Adnan Abu Amer, a contributor to the blog *Palestine Pulse*, quotes a Palestinian journalist

from Nablus who told *Al-Monitor* on condition of anonymity, "There are security incidents in the West Bank resulting in armed clashes due to the trade of arms, drugs, and cars." A senior Palestinian official told *Al-Monitor* on condition of anonymity, "The state of security chaos in the West Bank has resulted since early 2015 in about 26 Palestinian deaths – seven of which were in Nablus – and the majority of those involved in these incidents are security services personnel."

Jerusalem and the West Bank are on the brink of a great upheaval that threatens another major wave of emigration in light of the chaos that is increasing by the day. There are no signs that Palestinian organized crime will be eliminated or even mitigated. The future is bleak.

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