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East or West?

Musrara Neighborhood and the Dynamics of Mizrahi-Palestinian-Ashkenazi Relations

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the history of the Musrara neighborhood in Jerusalem from its foundation to the period following the Six Day war, adopting the perspective of urban microhistory. Using Musrara as a lens of analysis makes it possible to highlight how the constant reconfiguration of Jerusalem's urban space reflects not only the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the region, but also the specific ways in which these processes acquired distinctive meanings within the boundaries of the neighborhood itself. Through oral history and direct testimonies, this article retraces the lives of Musrara's new Mizrahim residents against the backdrop of ethnic and socioeconomic discrimination and the Arab Israeli conflict, while also examining the development of a political consciousness among them.

Musrara was a Palestinian bourgeois neighborhood until 1948, a frontier zone of a marginalized Mizrahi subproletariat between 1948 and 1967, a theatre of war and social conflict, and eventually a concrete and symbolic hinge between East and West following the Six Day War. The transformation of urban space thus sheds light on the interaction between national conflict and the ethno-social question—two crucial aspects for a more analytically comprehensive historical reconstruction of Israel and Palestine, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and the different degrees of subalternity produced by social hierarchies and nationalism.

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Introduction

This article aims to analyze the history of the Musrara neighborhood in Jerusalem from its foundation to the period following the Six-Day War, adopting the perspective of urban microhistory. Using Musrara as a lens of analysis makes it possible to highlight how the constant reconfiguration of Jerusalem's urban space reflects not only the social, political and cultural dynamics of the region, but also the specific ways in which these processes acquired different meanings within the boundaries of the neighborhood itself.

Musrara is a neighborhood that has represented a symbol of the radical transformations that reshaped the territory of Jerusalem between the early and the late twentieth-century. This neighborhood carries with it the memory of extremely different stories, of lived experiences and life trajectories that are incompatible—if not openly conflicting—where the lives of entire families were overwhelmed by the events of history. If we were to observe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the history of Mizrahim¹ in Israel through a closer lens, this small neighborhood would prove to be a privileged site capable of revealing more than entire historical or sociological investigations might disclose.

This paper has therefore set itself several objectives: first, to analyze Palestinian Musrara before 1948 through the retrospective gaze of the Palestinian residents who were dispossessed; second, examine the conditions of marginality and hardship experienced by the new Mizrahi population that inhabited in Musrara between 1948 and 1967; and eventually, to explore the different perspectives of Musrara's residents following the Six-Day war and the reopening of the neighborhood's borders. In comparison with the analysis of Paola Caridi and of Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson—whose work I have extensively drawn upon in examining the case of Musrara—this article focuses on the perspectives of the Musrarians after the expansion of the city's boundaries and the new geographical position that the neighborhood assumed after 1967.

The dichotomy between East and West—that is, the gaze that the Musrara's Mizrahi inhabitants direct either toward Jewish Israeli society or toward Palestinian Arab culture—constitutes the central theme of this paper. These two diametrically opposed perspectives—which will be clearly presented in the final section of the article—reveal the directions undertaken by the process of reaffirming the political and cultural identity of the Mizrahim. The transformation of urban space therefore sheds light on the interaction between national conflict and ethno-social question—two crucial aspects for an analytically comprehensive historical reconstruction of Israel and Palestine, of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and of the multiple levels of subalternity produced by social hierarchies and nationalism.

From a methodological perspective, the article combines the microhistorical approach with the use of oral history. In his essay "Microstoria: due o tre cose che so di lei," Carlo Ginzburg argues that "every social configuration is the result of the interaction of countless individual

¹ Mizrahim are Jews in Israel whose origins lie in Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa. The term "Mizrahi", which means "Oriental" in Hebrew, refers to a socio-cultural and economic category, used to distinguish Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin from the Ashkenazi Jewish population originating from Europe.

strategies: an interweaving that only close observation makes it possible to reconstruct.”² Microhistory therefore represents an essential element for a historical reconstruction in which it is possible to identify phenomena, relations, transformations—as they take shape in a specific case—that reveal or suggest complex and, at the same time, broader dynamics. In the volume *Microstoria e storia globale*, Francesca Trivellato emphasizes the relationship between “abstraction and detail” and the role that microhistory plays within this dialectic.³ Referring to one of the founding figures of Italian microhistory—Giovanni Levi—the author argues that “microhistory seeks not to sacrifice knowledge of the individual element to generalization, but also not to renounce every form of abstraction: minimal clues or individual cases can be revealing of more general phenomena.”⁴ Microhistory, therefore, as it developed in Italy in the second half of the seventies, grounded its approach in the in-depth study of available sources, in research, and in the identification of what can be inferred and analytically reconstructed through the study of cases that had previously been ignored or discarded. Or, as Ginzburg writes in the 2019 afterword to *Il formaggio e i vermi*, it is “an analytical history built around the study of cases.”⁵ The same methodological approach has also been embraced internationally by the historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who identified the close study of specific cases—most famously in *The Return of Martin Guerre*—as an effective means of uncovering “the hidden world of peasant sentiment and aspiration.”⁶

In this case, the reconstruction of an urban microhistory was made possible using oral history. This essay presents interviews conducted with several leaders and members of the Israeli Black Panthers movement—Reuven Abergel, Charlie Layani, and Eliezer Abergel—who lived in the Musrara neighborhood. These interviews enrich our understanding of the neighborhood’s history and transformations, as well as the perceptions, aspirations, and perspectives—at times divergent—of those who experienced it firsthand. Within the secondary literature on which I have relied, it is already possible to find direct testimonies and interviews, which I compared with those that I conducted myself. Oral history therefore represented a fundamental aspect of carrying out this historical research. From this perspective, it was not merely a useful supporting tool but assumed an autonomous value capable of offering a complex and diversified investigation. In *Voci della memoria*, Bruno Bonomo emphasizes the responsibility that historians bear when collecting the memories of historical actors through “an attitude capable of combining empathy and critical distance,” while seeking to give appropriate weight to the dimension of “individual experience and subjectivity.”⁷

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s own. Carlo Ginzburg, “Microstoria: due o tre cose che so di lei,” *Quaderni storici* 29, no. 86/2 (1994): 532.

³ Francesca Trivellato, *Microstoria e Storia Globale* (Rome: Officina Libraria, 2023), 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, *Il Formaggio e i vermi*, 10th ed. (Milan: Adelphi, 2019), 214.

⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983) 4.

⁷ Bruno Bonomo, *Voci della Memoria. L’uso delle fonti orali nella storia* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2013), 37-38.

Musrara before the State of Israel: Memories of a Vanished Neighborhood

In *Urban Neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies* (2020), the researchers Hilal Alkan and Nazan Maksudyan highlight three main perspectives for defining what distinguishes a neighborhood from another area of the city. First, they identify the spatial perspective, which defines the boundaries of a neighborhood within the broader urban context. According to the authors, these boundaries are not necessarily material; they may also be experienced, narrated, imagined and internalized in the bodies and everyday practices of those who traverse them. Second, the narrative component, which defines the neighborhood through stories that may be extremely diverse. Some memories are silenced or forgotten, while others persist through the recollections of those who recount them. Third, the perspective that foregrounds social relations: residents, as active social agents, define the boundaries through interaction and conflict with the rest of the city.⁸ According to Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson, Musrara exemplifies all three of these elements: from real and imagined boundaries that are difficult to cross, to competing narratives and memories that portray very different periods in the life of the neighborhood, and to the interactions between residents on the eastern and western edges of Musrara, which reflect the neighborhood's history following the establishment of the State of Israel.⁹

Within the volume edited by Alkan and Maksudyan, there is also an article by Johannes Becker entitled "Past Neighbourhoods: Palestinians and Jerusalem's 'Enlarged Jewish Quarter'" which shows how the Jewish quarter of the old city of Jerusalem was transformed following the Israeli conquest of 1967. Becker analyses how the perception of the Palestinian residents who left the area—and those who still inhabit it—has developed new spatial and temporal memories, often forgotten within the new dimension the quarter has acquired. Becker's perspective suggests that the context of war represents a rupture in the relationship between place, inhabitant and memory, one that is crucial in the production of narratives layered over time and space, yet incompatible in any attempt to reconstruct a single, unified history of the neighborhood.¹⁰

The history of Musrara presents an analogous case. The image of the neighborhood in the memories of its Palestinian residents has completely faded and now survives only in recollections and stories of those who once lived there. At the same time, Musrara has undergone new transformations and welcomed new residents, generating new memories and stories that intertwine with the old ones. This offers a complex and multifaceted picture, capable of bringing together opposing perceptions and imaginaries that are nonetheless equally real and present.

Musrara is an urban cluster founded in the late nineteenth century, around 1875, in Jerusalem under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. It is bordered to the south by the walls of

⁸ Hilal Alkan and Nazan Maksudyan, *Urban Neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies* (New York: Routledge Studies in Urbanism and the City, 2020), 1-14.

⁹ Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears': Musrara on the Margins of Jewish-Arab Existence in Jerusalem," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 28, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 2023): 77.

¹⁰ Johannes Becker, "Past Neighbourhoods: Palestinians and Jerusalem's enlarged Jewish Quarter," in *Urban Neighbourhood Formations*, eds. Alkan and Maksudyan, 99-118.

the old city, stretching between the New Gate and the Damascus Gate, and by the Pontifical Institute known as the Notre Dame de France Hospice; to the north by the ultra-Orthodox Jewish quarters of Mea Shearim and Geula; to the northeast by the predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah; and to the west by the “Russian Compound” and the commercial area of Jewish Jerusalem. Most of the houses in Musrara were built by Christian and Muslim Palestinian families between 1889 and 1925.¹¹ In her article “Musrara, The Center of the World,” Paola Caridi describes the neighborhood from an architectural perspective: it featured the “typical style of fin-de-siècle Jerusalem: local stones, sloping roofs on four sides, Arabic windows high and arched in the upper part, and rose gardens separating houses from the street.”¹²

Entire Palestinian families who had resided in the old city of Jerusalem moved into the new houses, reproducing the same lifestyles they had maintained within the walls. Numerous prominent Arab figures of Jerusalem chose to live in the new neighborhood, including the distinguished Palestinian politician Musa al-‘Alami, the Christian Sakanini family, and the Greek orthodox artist and painter Sophie Halaby. The inhabitants of early twentieth-century Jerusalem thus gave rise to the first neighborhood built outside the walls, inhabited by the city’s bourgeoisie which was mixed religiously and ethnically.¹³ Indeed, during the early decades of the twentieth century, Musrara also attracted members of the Jewish bourgeoisie of Jerusalem. Toward the end of Ottoman rule, a small Jewish quarter arose near Damascus Gate, in the area that is still considered today the Arab part of Musrara. In this area, the Jewish community built two medical institutions—the Jewish Health Station and the Pasteur Institute—which further attracted new Jewish residents to move there.¹⁴ However, in the period between the end of 1920 and the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, most Musrara’s Jewish residents left the area following several clashes among Arab and Jews. By 1938, in fact, only 200 Jews remained in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, until 1948, as indicated by the 1947 census of the Jewish Community Council, Jews continued to reside in Musrara, albeit in extremely limited numbers.¹⁵

The 1948 war radically transformed the city’s territory and the composition of its inhabitants. Between January and April of 1948, clashes between the Haganah,¹⁶ the Arab Liberation Army and Palestinian irregular forces led many Palestinian residents of western and southern Jerusalem to leave. This was also the case in Musrara, from which a large part of the Palestinian population—also following the spread of news about the Deir Yassin massacre¹⁷ on April 9, 1948—decided to depart and never return. In her book *Gerusalemme senza Dio*,

¹¹ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 78.

¹² Paola Caridi, “Musrara, the Center of the World,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 62 (2015): 30.

¹³ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 78.

¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Haganah was the main Jewish Zionist paramilitary organization during the period of the British Mandate in Palestine. It was founded in 1920 and remained active until 1948, when, following the creation of Israel, it was integrated into the Israel Defense Forces.

¹⁷ The Deir Yassin massacre has gone down in history as the bloodiest massacre carried out during the Nakba by the Zionist paramilitary groups Irgun and Lehi, which led to the death of more than 100 people in the Palestinian village near the Jerusalem area.

Paola Caridi offers an image of the neighborhood before the Nakba¹⁸ through the eyes of a Palestinian Christian resident forced to abandon it, returning only decades later as a guest. As Paola Caridi faithfully recounts, “his memories, even half a century later, are still very vivid; he remembers the people, the houses, the trees, retracing the streets of his childhood, still etched in his memory, even though today they represent the paths of a painful nostalgia.”¹⁹ In the cycle of memories of Musrara during Ottoman and Mandate periods, another name evocatively emerges confirming how this neighborhood can be interpreted as the inexorable symbol of all the seasons of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is the name of Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, a Palestinian Christian boy born in Musrara in 1944 who lived on Saint Paul Street—today Shivtei Israel Street. Like many others, the child was forced to leave the city in 1948, taking refuge in Jordan and later being admitted to a study program in the United States. However, the memory of the war remained deeply imprinted in his soul even many years later. On the night between June 5 and 6, 1968, the boy became known for the assassination of Robert Francis Kennedy—the younger brother of American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who had been assassinated on November 22, 1963—and who was expected to run as democratic candidate in the U.S. presidential elections. Sirhan Bishara Sirhan killed him because of the support Kennedy had shown toward Israel. This event—which also profoundly changed American history—occurred not coincidentally just one year after the Six-Day War which, in addition to reshaping the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, once again transformed the face of Musrara.²⁰

On May 14, Israel definitively occupied the neighborhood following the evacuation carried out a few days earlier by British forces. However, just five days later, when the Arab Legion entered Jerusalem to secure a connection between Ramallah and the old city through Sheikh Jarrah and Musrara, fighting broke out again. The prolonged conflict led the Israeli commander Moshé Dayan and the Jordan commander ‘Abudullah El-Tell to draw a new territorial boundary that split the neighborhood in two. On November 30, 1948, in a house in Musrara, the two leaders met to draw an imaginary «urban line» that would separate the Israeli and Jordanian forces present in Jerusalem. Initially, this line—which cut across houses and streets in the neighborhood—was conceived as a temporary boundary pending an armistice that would establish permanent borders. Nevertheless, on April 3, 1949, the same line proposed by the two leaders became the internal frontier of Jerusalem, dividing the city between Israeli and Jordanian sovereignty. According to IDF archives, as reported by Naor and Jacobson, this new seven-kilometer-long frontier zone stretched from Beit Safafa in the southern part of the city to Musrara in the north and was known as the *No Man’s Land*. In some areas, the zone was approximately 200 meters wide, while in Musrara the distance between the two sides was only 10 meters. The borders were sometimes reinforced with

¹⁸ Nakba, meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic, refers to the forced displacement of the Palestinian population from the territories of historic Palestine in connection with the establishment of the State of Israel and the 1948 War. In this period, approximately 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes and several villages were destroyed, giving rise to the Palestinian refugee issue and the question of the “right of return,” which remain central to Palestinian collective memory.

¹⁹ Paola Caridi, *Gerusalemme senza Dio. Ritratto di una città crudele* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013), 36-37.

²⁰ Asaf Elia-Shalev, *Israel’s Black Panthers: The Radicals who punctured a nation’s founding myth* (Oakland: University California Press, 2024), 16.

barbed wire and actual separation walls, along with signs in Hebrew, Arabic and Yiddish warning residents of mines planted.²¹ The history of bourgeois Palestinian Musrara prior to 1948 vanished entirely. Situated along the frontier, between 1948 and 1967, the neighborhood became trapped in the perpetual conflict between the two regional powers, transforming from a center of early twentieth-century urban modernization in Jerusalem into a frontier zone of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Between 1948 and 1967: Musrara as a Marginalized Mizrahi Ghetto

As noted previously, Musrara changed drastically following the 1948 war and its consequences. The Jerusalem municipality had to urgently confront the issue of the new Jewish immigrants arriving in the city. The abandoned Arab residential areas became one of the main locations for settling these new citizens, in order to prevent the return of Palestinian refugees. Within ten years, the demographic situation of Musrara was completely transformed. As reported by Naor and Jacobson, according to the census of 1961, 4040 people were living in Musrara, 80% of whom were Jewish immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Particularly, 58,3% were originally from Morocco, followed by 9.6% of Algerians and Iraqis and 7% of Turks and Persians.²² Most of the new inhabitants of Musrara were therefore composed of “Eastern” Jews, and half of the population consisted of children and young people under the age of nineteen. As Paola Caridi argues

Musrara remained an “Eastern” neighbourhood after 1948 although profoundly transformed: its new residents were no longer Ottoman subjects, but citizens of the new State of Israel, while still sharing an Arab-Jewish culture that distanced them from the Ashkenazi élite. Thus, the neighbourhood was inhabited by a new urban underclass that shared the habits and smells of the Arab culture mixed with a harsh social condition.²³

Indeed, the socioeconomic circumstances of the new arrivals were tough: despair, hunger and unemployment were the three main structural elements of Musrara that, from the early 1950s onward, began to take the shape of an area densely populated. Nevertheless, a series of articles had already begun to appear in October 1950 in the Sephardic newspaper *Hed ha-Mizrah*,²⁴ collecting testimonies about the living conditions of the new residents. Aharon, originally from Casablanca, described the state of degradation in which his family lived in Musrara: “He shared two rooms with his wife and four daughters, some sleeping on beds and others on mattresses laid on the floor. One daughter suffered tuberculosis and was unable to

²¹ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 80-81.

²² Ibid., 82.

²³ Caridi, *Gerusalemme senza Dio*, 60-61.

²⁴ It was a newspaper, initially published twice a month and later weekly, that was published in Palestine/Israel between 1942 and 1951 in Hebrew and specifically addressed topics related to Sephardic Judaism.

recover due to the poor diet and inadequate sanitary conditions.”²⁵ Even ten years later, on July 7, 1961, in an article in the Communist Party weekly *Qol ha’am*, Musrara was described as “a neighborhood of absolute poverty surrounded by the holiness of Jerusalem’s old city, where the only way out was through its western boundary toward the city center. The eastern side, by contrast, was blocked by the invisible border that cut through the neighborhood’s main street.”²⁶ The article showed how the area was full of garbage, lacking drainage system and insisted on the absence of toilet facilities, and the presence of a single water that was shared by thirty families. Furthermore, the article depicted the interior conditions of the homes: between six and thirteen people living in a single room, damp walls, and many children in need of medical care due to poor sanitary conditions.²⁷

The transition of Musrara illustrated the changes that the 1948 war generated in several border localities. Musrara, moreover, was situated in a unique position that served a dual function in the logic of the Israeli leadership: on the one hand, it acted as a peripheral neighborhood with respect to Jewish Jerusalem; on the other hand, it represented a border district that separated Israel from Jordanian territory. Musrara’s uniqueness thus left the neighborhood isolated and trapped between two territories that remained largely unknown to most of its inhabitants between 1948 and 1967. Furthermore, Musrara also became a clear example of the process of destruction and renewal of neighborhoods abandoned by the Palestinian population. Like many other urban areas or villages, it underwent a phenomenon of eradication of the Palestinian presence through the changing of street names and even the name of the neighborhood itself. In 1958, on the tenth anniversary of the founding of Israel, the name was officially changed from Musrara to Morasha. However, most of the Mizrahi residents were not accustomed to pronouncing the new name, and Musrara remains the commonly used designation to this day. During a recent visit to the main school of the neighborhood, at an informal meeting with elderly residents, the mayor and spokesperson of Musrara reopened the debate over the name, reaffirming the importance of the term Musrara as a site of memory for the parents who had moved there and for the hardships endured in the first decades of their arriving.

Therefore, the inhabitants of Musrara were meant to be part of the “absorbing process” of the new *olim* (Jewish immigrants). However, the life in Musrara in no way represented a model of integration into the urban fabric of Jerusalem. Most of its young residents spent their days in the streets lacking schools and educational systems, without being aware of the broader context surrounding them. As reported by Asaf Elia-Shalev, for years, the only school within the neighborhood was the religious institution of the ultra-Orthodox movement Agudat Israel,²⁸ which offered an education based on Torah lessons usually delivered by teachers speaking in Yiddish, sometimes beating the Oriental students if they let slip a few words in Arabic.²⁹ In an interview with Eliezer Abergel—a Moroccan Jew who moved to

²⁵ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 82.

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ It is a political movement that developed in Poland toward the end of the nineteenth century and served as a reference point for the Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, of Ashkenazi rite. After developing in Israel, it became the main Orthodox religious party in Israel among Ashkenazi Jews.

²⁹ Elia-Shalev, *Israel’s Black Panthers*, 25.

Musrara with his family in 1950s—he recounts his experience in this school and explains why he decided to leave it:

There was a school here in the neighborhood, Beit Ya'aqov. I went to school, and the teachers were particularly strict. I was beaten, I was not educated, and I was mocked. What did I gain from it? I wanted to go to school, but I decided to leave without telling my parents. I chose to go to the greengrocers and some shops in the neighborhood to help them in exchange for something to eat—not money, I was satisfied with food.³⁰

The peculiar position of Musrara, as we have seen, placed its residents in a condition of marginalization that enclosed the neighborhood between the area of the *no man's land* and the central Jerusalem, to which the access was denied to Musrarians. It was no coincidence, in fact, that young people would push beyond the frontier, venturing into the *no man's land*. As reported by Naor and Jacobson, Rafi Marciano and Reuven Abergel—two youngsters of Musrara—recalled football matches near the *no man's land* where Jewish and Arab children would kick the ball back and forth across the wall. In an interview taken from Naor's and Jacobson's text, Reuven Abergel—the future leader of the Israeli Black Panthers³¹—remembered a Palestinian friend, Isma'il, with whom he often spoke in Arabic through the wall that separated them and who occasionally threw him candies. Abergel sometimes found it difficult to accept them because he had nothing to give in return.³² The *no man's land* was an area frequently crossed by the youth of Musrara, driven by their innocence and unaware of the dangers of the war. Charlie Layani, in an interview conducted by the author in Musrara on July 22, 2024, recalls his life in the neighborhood, highlighting the spontaneity of children in a context of constant conflict:

Until the Six-Day War, we grew up without knowing anything. We were shut in the neighborhood. On one side of the border were the Jordanians. We had nothing to do and nowhere to play. Sometimes we would go to the cinema in the morning and watch movies about the Romans. To imitate them, we would take pieces of wood and make swords out of branches and fight like that. We used garbage bins as shields and threw stones at each other. That was our way of playing. But one day, we got tired of it and decided to create a football pitch. Where did we go? Into the *no man's land*—that's what they called it, the land between us and the Jordanians. No one was allowed to enter it. But we built a football pitch there on the border, and every time the ball went beyond the fence, we did not care—we would climb over to

³⁰ Eliezer Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 22, 2024.

³¹ The Israeli Black Panthers was a Mizrahi political movement that emerged in the early 1970s in Musrara and later spread throughout the rest of the country. The people who were interviewed in this article were all part of the movement and its leadership. The movement's main struggle was aimed at improving the material conditions of the Mizrahim, but it was also instrumental in fostering political awareness among Mizrahi in Israel and in denouncing the socioeconomic, political and cultural discrimination present in Israeli society.

³² Naor and Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears'," 88.

retrieve it. At that point, the Jordanian soldier would shout at us: “what are you doing! Get out of here!” We were not aware of the danger, and we did not think about it. But sometimes they also shot into our neighborhood. They killed a girl. Why? They would shoot without reason; even though we did not cross the border, they sometimes fired. They shot many times here.³³

In the final words of this interview, Charlie Layani refers to the tragic death of Yaffa Binyamin, a fourteen-year-old girl who was killed by Jordanian soldiers in 1965. The death of the daughter of a family of new immigrants from Iraq took on national significance and the residents of Musrara, without knowing, were portrayed by the country’s public opinion as pioneers and “guardians of the borders.” Musrara’s strategic position thus became part of the Israeli national narrative and was embodied into the Zionist discourse emphasizing the need to protect the borders.

However, the condition of ghettoization to which the inhabitants of Musrara were subjected, was not limited to the border dividing Israel from Jordan but also existed within Jewish Jerusalem itself. Young people from Musrara were rarely allowed to go to other parts of Jerusalem, further underscoring the distinction between Ashkenazi upper-class neighborhoods and Mizrahi underclass peripheries. From this perspective, another passage from the interview is particularly interesting, in which Charlie Layani emphasizes this aspect of his childhood:

Sometimes we would go into the city. The police would promptly stop us: “Boy?” Yes, I was an 11-or 12-years-old boy. “Where do you live?” I was walking in my own city; I was on Jaffa Street. I answered: “I live in Musrara,” and the police officer told me, “Fly back home!” Why was it like that? Because it was as if we had escaped from a refugee camp. Have you ever heard of the Second Israel? There were the Ashkenazim, who were the elite, and then there were us, the poor. That’s how we lived here, we could not go into the city, and we were afraid to go to the center of Jerusalem because we knew that they would drive us away. Musrara was like a ghetto; we did not know anyone outside the neighborhood.³⁴

Musrara thus represented a closed neighborhood with a “double border,” both physical and mental, that trapped the young inhabitants within it. On one side of the boundary were the rifles of the Jordanian army aimed in their direction; on the other side lay a completely unexplored world where Musrarians were prevented from moving freely. Until 1967, Musrara stood as the evident example of the segregation of Mizrahi Jews within the Israeli urban context, revealing the contradictions of the integration policies promoted under the ideology of “the Ingathering of the Exiles.”³⁵ Reuven Abergel perceptively brings out this

³³ Charlie Layani, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 22, 2024.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “The Ingathering of the Exiles” represents one of the fundamental principles on which the ideology of Zionism was founded: the idea that in the State of Israel Jews of the diaspora could be reunified. The unification of Israel’s

aspect, using a metaphor that conveys the suffering of the Musrarians and the subsequent massive protest of the Israeli Black Panthers:

We were not allowed to go into the white neighborhoods. When we went there, the police would arrest us. It is as if a Palestinian boy today came to Musrara. There would be the border patrol and a policeman stopping him and asking: "what are you doing here?" Well, it was the same for us; we could not go to Rehavia.³⁶ Once, I was beaten by a policeman and I was arrested at the age of nine for leaving Musrara. I mean, I was in the Jewish country, but this country was not mine. I had to stay in Musrara and not move unless I was given permission. So, when you leave a pool of water for a long time, the water becomes stagnant and produces many mosquitos. Well, the mosquitos were the Black Panthers.³⁷

Despite the presence of borders, barbed wires and Jordanian army, the boundary between Musrara and East Jerusalem was constantly being tested. On the one hand, Palestinian refugees attempted to cross it in order to return to their abandoned homes; on the other hand, Jews tried to cross the frontier in an effort to reclaim their previous lives. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, the Israeli police reported that around one thousand Israelis had crossed the border for personal or economic reasons. As early as June 1951, Naor and Jacobson show the example of Israeli police who arrested a group of individuals who were forging passports to facilitate the return of the new immigrants to Morocco.³⁸ The extreme poverty and the perpetual conflict playing out in the streets of Musrara pushed many residents to seek any possible way to leave not only the neighborhood, but the State of Israel itself. Reuven Abergel clearly described life in Musrara before 1967 and his father's failed attempts to leave the country and return to Morocco:

Now we are sitting in my house. It was as if, from the other side of the road, we could see the Jordanian army. In Morocco, we and the Muslims were friends, we listened to music together and greeted one another. Suddenly, we found ourselves in a situation that was the exact opposite. The Jews who had convinced us to come to Israel, we never saw them again. We ended up on the border and once again lived next to the Muslims. Only this time, the Muslims we saw were all armed and, at times, they would shoot. We had done nothing wrong to anyone. Why were they shooting like that? Until 1967, for 17 years from 1950 when we arrived here, our lives were in danger. I was already a grown boy, but I did not know the truth. I did not understand why that was the situation we were forced to live in. I thought the Jordanians constantly kept their rifles pointed at me and not at what I later understood to be my real enemy only later. The Zionists told me to come here

Jewish citizens on an ethnic basis formed the foundation of the Law of Return (1950) which legally makes it possible for Jews to become Israeli citizens.

³⁶ Rehavia is one of the most important Ashkenazi wealthy neighborhoods of Jerusalem.

³⁷ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

³⁸ Naor and Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears'," 89-90.

because I am Jewish and that in the Land of Israel, I would find the place where I would feel at home. From this day on, I never felt at home again; I missed where I had been. They took away our documents. I remembered my father trying twice to take us back to Morocco. We were like prisoners. Then, in 1967, everything changed. But why, until then, had I not seen even a single Ashkenazi?³⁹

Toward East or West? Perspectives of Musrarians after Six-Day War

The year 1967 marked a turning point in the history of Israel and radically transformed the history of Musrara and its inhabitants. The Six-Day war—fought between 5 and 10 June—substantially redefined Israel’s territorial borders, also severely affecting the future of the Palestinians through the military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. According to traditional Israeli historiography, the Six-Day war was launched by Israel as a pre-emptive measure to counter the adjacent Arab powers—Egypt, Jordan, and Syria—which, in their alliance with the Soviet Union, were increasingly perceived as threatening. However, Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi has argued that this threat was a myth. In his historical reconstruction, the United States and its intelligence agencies, moreover, has assured Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson that Israel’s military strength was significantly superior to that of the other Arab states combined. Indeed, U.S. intelligence ruled out the possibility of a coordinated Arab attack against Israel and remained firmly convinced that Israel enjoyed clear military superiority and was not facing an existential threat.⁴⁰ As reported by Arturo Marzano, several historical analyses argue that the Arab powers had no real intention of attacking Israel and that the Israeli offensive aimed to “finish the job” begun in 1956 with the Suez Canal Crisis, and to “teach the Arabs another lesson.”⁴¹ In his meticulous reconstruction of the origins and consequences of the Six-Day War, historian Tom Segev recounts the criticism levelled by former General Yigal Allon against David Ben-Gurion, whom he accused of having abandoned the conquest of Jerusalem’s old city and the West Bank during the 1948 Arab-Israel War. According to Segev, a deep sense of frustration had spread throughout Israel, shared by many of the soldiers who had fought in the War of Independence as well as by prominent figures within the military establishment. For Allon himself, the annexation of the West Bank was primarily motivated by strategic considerations: establishing Israel’s borders along the Jordan River and around Jerusalem would have made the state less vulnerable from a security standpoint.⁴² According to Segev’s interpretation, the 1967 war came to represent, in the imagination of a significant portion of Israeli society, the ultimate fulfilment of the Zionist project. Segev further demonstrates that this perspective, combined with the opportunity to redraw the

³⁹ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

⁴⁰ Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 97–104.

⁴¹ Arturo Marzano, *Storia dei Sionismi. Lo stato degli ebrei da Herzl a oggi* (Rome: Carocci, 2017), 139.

⁴² Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that transformed the Middle East* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 174–175.

region's borders, enjoyed broad support among the senior ranks of the Israeli military. Although there had been no intention in the preceding years to launch a military campaign, by the mid-1960s numerous confidential discussions had already raised the possibility of expanding Israel's borders. In 1963, the future Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin himself suggested to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol that Israel should consider expanding its border if the right opportunity presented itself. According to this interpretation, the Six-Day War ultimately provided precisely such an opportunity, fundamentally reshaping the political and strategic geography of the region.⁴³

The war initiated by Israel became a full-scale war of conquest that far exceeded the objectives originally set by the Israeli army and the government. In just six days, Israel defeated Egypt, occupying the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip; defeated Jordan, occupying all the Jordan River valley, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, including the old city; and defeated Syria, occupying the Golan Heights. Although Israel did not have a specific plan for the newly conquered territories, it gradually began to encourage settlement in the occupied areas, particularly in Gaza and the West Bank, facilitating the growth of the "Gush Emunim" movement (Bloc of the Faithful) which, on the theoretical basis of religious zionism, sought to promote Jewish settlements in the territories of the Biblical Israel in order to hasten the arrival of the Messiah. Initially, the Israeli government allowed the creation of only a few settlements, justifying them as "military security reasons."

However, over the decades, the number of new settlements grew enormously, and along with them also expanded the ideology based on messianic redemption. Although this is not the central focus of this topic, it is interesting to observe how the expansion of the borders once again affected the Mizrahi population. On the one hand, several oriental Jews moved to the West Bank for reasons of economic opportunity (many settled in the new territories not only for ideological reasons but also for economic advantages due to a more convenient real estate market). On the other hand, the opening of the labor market to the Palestinians placed the new Palestinian working class in direct competition with Mizrahim, generating tensions among them in the job market. The constant search for low-cost labor fostered Palestinians at the expense of Mizrahim, causing resentment among the latter toward the former. This represents one of the many reasons behind the current distance between the Mizrahi and Palestinian population, as Reuven Abergel once again explains clearly:

Thousands of Palestinians joined us in the search for work. We were all doing low-paid manual labor. After the Six-Day war, they stopped hiring us and began hiring Palestinians. When we started asking why, they told us: "the Palestinian comes to work almost for free. Do you want to work for free?" Why should I? Today, the Jew who defines himself as Mizrahi hates the Palestinian because he took his job, his means of livelihood, and lowered the value of his work. But it was not the Palestinian, I mean, he had no more choice than we did. It was the occupation that created these conditions. The Palestinian also had nothing, to the point that he would accept

⁴³ Ibid., 176-177.

working almost for free just to survive and to support his children. That was the reality—it was unbearable.⁴⁴

Moreover, 1967 also transformed Musrara from a geographical point of view. The neighborhood which had been located on the border with Jerusalem under Jordanian authority, assumed a new central position within the city. Its location near to the old city made Musrara a transit area crossed by a large part of the Ashkenazi population. From a neighborhood trapped between two borders, Musrara opened up both to Palestinian Jerusalem and to Ashkenazi Jerusalem. The young residents of Musrara began to realize the differences between their living conditions and the well-off social situation of much of West Jerusalem, gradually developing a sense of anger and a desire of redress. The research conducted through the interviews with the old inhabitants of Musrara highlights how the opening of the neighborhood after 1967 provoked profoundly different reactions. The majority of Musrara's population turned toward the rest of Israeli Jewish society in an attempt to acquire a social status that would allow them to become an integral part of the State of Israel. At the same time, a small minority welcomed the renewed proximity to Arab culture, naturally reshaping an Arab-Jewish identity within the new Middle Eastern context. These two inclinations offer a diversified picture of the general attitude of Mizrahim following 1967, and, more broadly, in the more recent history of the State of Israel. In the case of Musrara, the interviews clearly reveal these two perspectives. On the one hand, Reuven Abergel remembers 1967 as an opening toward the eastern side of Jerusalem and as a new personal rapprochement with the Arab world, which reminded him of his connection to Morocco. On the other hand, Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel tend to recall with greater emphasis their encounter with the rest of Israeli society, aspiring at a social redemption. In the article of Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson, it is reported what Reuven Abergel wrote about the first contacts with East Jerusalem. Abergel maintained that "the encounter with the Arab neighbors was fascinating," and that "he immediately found a common language and the same music he listened to in his parent's home."⁴⁵ It was the first time he met people in Israel whom he considered similar to himself, arguing that his attempts to find his proper place in West Jerusalem had failed, and had gradually led him to realize that there was no possibility for him to integrate there. In the interview conducted by the author, Abergel once again expresses his inclination to relate to the Palestinian world of East Jerusalem. He speaks of it in terms of a "natural connection," where cultural proximity was also accompanied by the possibility of engaging in joint economic activities. Thus, Reuven Abergel recalls his opening toward the Palestinian world:

We went to the old city and met the local people. It was a natural connection, like a family that has not spoken for 17 years and now makes music together. We did business together; we sold drugs and worked together because our clients were Ashkenazim. We opened cafés with Arabic live music and a club that we called

⁴⁴ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

⁴⁵ Naor and Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears'," 88.

“Oriental Nights.” I remember once we needed to find musicians, and I went by taxi with a friend to Gaza. We walked around and eventually found some musicians. All the Mizrahim who lived near Gaza—for example in Ashdod, Ashkelon or Netivot—used to go there often. They bought fruit and vegetables, and they did business. There were never any problems. The problems were created by the system when it realized that the Oriental Jews were slipping out of its hands. They began closing all our places; they shut down our venues, and they started dismantling the solidarity between Mizrahim and Palestinians. Truly, there was an important bond: we had a hotel in Ramallah, I brought musicians from Bethlehem, I slept at friend’s house in Abu Dis and in Shuafat. They understood that the connection between us and the Palestinians was dangerous for them, and they created the conditions to dissolve it. In prisons they began placing us in separate cells to disunite us—this is how I began to understand politics.⁴⁶

Reuven Abergel therefore argues that the solidarity that emerged between Mizrahim and Palestinians after 1967 was interpreted by the ruling class as a dangerous phenomenon that had to be opposed. Furthermore, he sees in the period after the Six-Day war the beginning of a political awareness that gradually took shape through the experience of his life and the suffering of his socioeconomic condition. For Abergel, the encounter with East Jerusalem represented a milestone in his political consciousness and a revelation that allowed him to awaken his forgotten memories.

Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel, on the other hand, emphasized their contact with other neighborhoods of Jerusalem and the differences between them and their Ashkenazi peers. This is how they remembered the period after 1967:

After the Six-day war, we were seventeen years old and the borders opened. We started to meet people from outside the neighborhood, and we saw how they lived. We realized that we were living in a ghetto. It seemed like two different worlds, like Africa and England. We met people from other neighborhoods whose socioeconomic situation was far better than ours. In this way, we began to give significance to our suffering.⁴⁷

According to Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel, the opening of the internal border represented a concrete opportunity to escape the condition of marginalization to which they had been subjected. As with Reuven Abergel, this transformation of space also stimulated the growth of political awareness. In this case, however, their gaze was directed toward Israeli society and took the shape of national claims, in which the Jewish dimension of the State became the instrument through which they could reaffirm their political and cultural identity. As Baruch Kimmerling argues, with the decline of Mapai’s hegemony—externally with the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and internally with the Likud victory in the 1977 elections—new

⁴⁶ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

⁴⁷ Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 22, 2024.

national, cultural and ethnic groups, initially relegated to the margins of Israeli collective, began to emerge.⁴⁸ It was no coincidence that the Mizrahim, with second and third generations, developed new and influential forms of cultural and political mobilization that became deeply central and crucial in the history of Israel.

Conclusion

Musrara therefore represented a cross-section of the history of Jerusalem both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel. From a neighborhood of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, it was transformed between 1948 and 1967 into a neighborhood of the urban Mizrahi underclass. The alienation of the Mizrahi population along the western border of Jerusalem clearly reflected the difficulties of the “Absorption Process” and the limits of the Israeli ideology of the “Ingathering of the Exiles.” The year 1967 marked a turning point: the end of the trap in which the inhabitants of Musrara had been confined opened them up to Jerusalem, both East and West, fostering the development of deeply dichotomous political perspectives and identity reaffirmations. The Israeli Black Panthers experience in Musrara gave rise to the large-scale intra-Jewish ethnic conflict. Although the Panthers did not have the strength or organization to transform themselves into a mass movement, they undoubtedly represented a driving force in the acquisition of political awareness within the Mizrahi population. As the case study of Musrara demonstrates, the political consciousness of the Mizrahim was far from uniform and developed on different levels in various parts of the country. In this article, Musrara has been adopted as an analytical lens to observe the profound changes in the urban fabric and to show how these transformations reveal the contradictions within Israeli society, the relationship with Palestinians, and the influence produced by the conflict and continuous reconfiguration of the space. Through the study of Musrara, it is possible to reconstruct two main attitudes within Mizrahi political culture, and, more broadly, within the complex interaction of relations among Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, and Palestinians in the region. On the one hand, a minority turned its gaze toward the East in an attempt to rebuild the Arab-Jewish identity which had been lost with the displacement of the Jewish Population from Islamic Countries. In “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew,” Ella Shohat claims the necessity of a cultural, political and economic integration of Israel into the Middle East as the only tool capable of ending the binary logic of war.⁴⁹ Similarly, following in the footsteps of Ella Shohat, other intellectual figures have politically and theoretically advocated this idea: from the concept of “Hitmazrehut”⁵⁰ (Becoming of the East) clearly expressed by Atalia Omer, to Orly Noy’s idea of “Dismantling the Villa in the Jungle.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 130.

⁴⁹ Ella Shohat, “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew,” in *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings of Ella Shohat* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 82.

⁵⁰ Atalia Omer, “Hitmazrehut or Becoming of the East: Re-Orienting Israeli Social Mapping,” *Critical Sociology* 43, no. 6 (2017): 949-976.

⁵¹ Orly Noy, “Dismantling the Villa in the Jungle,” in *The Israeli Black Panthers Haggadah*, eds. Itamar Haritan and Reuven Abergel, 2nd ed. (New York, Brooklyn: Jewish Current Press, 2022).

In this regard, Hillel Cohen, in *Enemies a Love story: Mizrahi-Arab-Ashkenazi Relations since the Dawn of Zionism*, identifies four different Mizrahi attitudes toward the Palestinians. According to Cohen, although such a perspective did exist, the idea of an Arab-Mizrahi alliance against Zionism is more a political construction emerging from the Palestinian interpretation of the Mizrahi struggle than a concrete Mizrahi political project. Historically, more common than the notion of cultural affinity and political alliance—advanced, however, by Reuven Abergel—is the idea of Mizrahim as a “bridge to peace.” Within Zionist framework, this view sees Mizrahi cultural ambivalence as potentially capable of mediating between Arabs and Jews.⁵² On the other hand, a large segment of the Mizrahi population reshaped its political consciousness around the need to become a central political subject within Israel. Jewish identity thus became a unifying element for the Mizrahim and characterized the crucial factor for claiming a space within Israeli culture and politics. The decline of the hegemony of Mapai—largely generated by the growing distance between Mizrahim and the Israeli leadership—represented the breaking point that allowed new forms of political identity to emerge among Mizrahim, sometimes fostering a significance convergence between marginalized populations, nationalism, and new models of ultra-Orthodox religiosity. This tendency, moreover, sheds light on one of the contradictions inherent in the history of Zionism and the State of Israel: the belief for the State to contain both a liberal dimension and an ethno-religious character. The sociologist Oren Yiftachel argues that the first demonstration of the concept of “Ethnocracy” - through which he defines the peculiar political form of the State of Israel—can be identified in the progressive process of the “Judaization” of Israeli society imposed by the State. According to Yiftachel, this process can be analyzed through the cultural, political and social relations between Jews and Palestinians, and, at the same time, through what he defines as “ethno-classes” within the borders of Israel—that is, the subordinate relations between the Ashkenazi establishment and the Mizrahi population.⁵³

In the analysis of Musrara after 1967, the aim is to highlight these attitudes and, at the same time, to raise questions about how the transformation of the space can also serve as a driving force for new political perspectives and for the multiple reformulations of identity among the populations affected by these changes. One question remains open: the East-West dichotomy is still crucial to the evolution of Israel. How could a State located in the Middle East continue to identify itself as Western despite its complex social configuration and the constant danger of military confrontation with its neighbors?

⁵² Hillel Cohen, *Enemies, a Love Story: Mizrahi-Arab-Ashkenazi Relations Since the Dawn of Zionism* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2025).

⁵³ Oren Yiftachel, “Nation Building and the Division of Space: Frontiers and Domination in the Israeli ‘Ethnocracy’,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 4, no. 3 (1998): 33-58.