



ENCLAVE MICROPOLIS: THE PARADOXICAL CASE OF RAMALLAH/AL-BIREH

LISA TARAKI

Among the consequences of the consolidation of the Israeli closure regime have been the contraction of Palestinians' social worlds and the emergence of new forms of localism. Unlike the more parochial West Bank towns of Nablus, Hebron, and Jenin, Ramallah/al-Bireh has taken on many of the cosmopolitan aspects of larger metropolises—Beirut, Cairo, Tunis—because of a combination of historical influences, present-day migration patterns, and political realities. The result is a paradoxical “enclave city” whose sights are oftentimes more fixed on the global rather than the national level.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE SPATIAL REGIME being consolidated in the occupied West Bank today, a result of the Israeli policy variously characterized as Bantustanization, cantonization, enclavization, and ghettoization, have been discussed at length in recent years. A tremendous outpouring of documentation and reporting, analysis, opinion, and activism has been devoted to this issue; monitoring by international, Palestinian, and Israeli agencies and organizations has shown the policy of fragmentation's devastating impact on the economy, social networks, the provision of basic services such as healthcare and education, and the prospects for an end to Israel's colonization of the West Bank and Gaza.¹

One of the less-analyzed aspects of the emerging spatial regime is its effect on urban life as it is lived and experienced by Palestinians. Among the consequences of the consolidation of this regime have been the contraction of Palestinians' social worlds and the emergence of new forms of localism. Perhaps the most curious and paradoxical of these is the “cosmopolitan/metropolitan” localism of the twin cities of Ramallah/al-Bireh,² the subject of this essay.

Ramallah/al-Bireh today is the undisputed political and cultural center of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, yet it is as insulated from the rest of Palestine as the parochial localisms of Hebron, Jenin, or Nablus. The contraction of Palestinian social worlds under the impact of the occupation's spatial regime has paradoxically focused the gaze of this enclave city away from the Palestinian interior and toward the Arab world and beyond, most notably toward the city of

LISA TARAKI is associate professor of sociology and dean of graduate studies at Birzeit University in Palestine. She thanks the three anonymous reviewers whose comments improved this article.

Amman. This is especially expedited by the system of “VIP” travel privileges accessible and affordable to the better-off sections of the Palestinian middle class, arrangements that considerably decrease the travel time across the torturous Israeli and Jordanian security zones at the crossing point on the Jordan River. Indeed, this urban island at times appears better connected to the metropolises of the region—Amman, Cairo, Beirut, and of late Dubai—than with other, similarly enclaved Palestinian cities and towns. The result is that this small urban center with a population of barely over 60,000 shares certain critical features (albeit in miniature) with these much larger Arab metropolises, most notably the increasing social heterogeneity of the population; the growing social disparities and their normalization; and the globalized, modernist urban ethos articulated by a new middle class.

ENCLAVIZATION AS THE NEW STATUS QUO

Ghazi-Walid Falah has noted that Israeli military strategy since the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 is in fact part of a long-term strategy of spatial demolition and strangulation. Far from being a recent phenomenon, the “enclavisation of space” has been “implemented as an instrument of spatial expansion and control since 1967 in the Occupied West Bank but [is] rooted in a long-standing policy of territorial expropriation—to dismember the space of the remaining Palestinian population.”³ In a similar vein, Leila Farsakh has noted that the Israeli permit system, the territorial fragmentation of the occupied Palestinian territory under the Oslo accords, and the expansion of settlements have all contributed to the creation of disconnected Palestinian population reserves that have the characteristics of Bantustans rather than of cantons.⁴ More generally, Jeff Halper, deploying the term “matrix of control,” has described the means by which the West Bank has been “carved into small, disconnected enclaves, surrounded and indeed truncated by massive Israeli settlement blocs, subject to Israeli military and economic closures.”⁵

The political consequences of this regime are not difficult to predict. Falah views enclaving as a means not only of cutting off spatial interflow and heightening control, but also of sundering enclaved space from other spatial areas, thus confining and drastically weakening the population economically, politically, and socially—in effect “neutralizing” its challenge as a potential opponent.⁶ Similarly, Sari Hanafi, who describes the Israeli colonial project as “spaciocidal,” has noted that the policy becomes possible by deploying bio-politics to categorize Palestinians into various “states of exception” that render them powerless against Israel.⁷

There is no doubt that the spatial dismemberment of Palestinian society, among other factors, has contributed to the fragmentation of political action. National-level politics, a strong feature of political life in the 1970s and 1980s, has gradually given way to more local manifestations of resistance, organizing, and activism. The near-total ban on movement between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, coupled with the extreme difficulty of physical mobility

within the West Bank in recent years, has rendered coordination of national-level political action far more difficult. As a result, localized expressions of

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organizing and resistance have emerged, especially in response to immediate Israeli practices such as incursions and sieges, assassinations, and mass arrests. Moreover, the sheer volume and diversity of such events since 2000 have rendered impractical the task of national-level mobilization as an everyday practice. To this must be added a degree of ennui and despair that has pervaded the Palestinian body politic, making a national-level response to each and every Israeli assault increasingly difficult to sustain. The more recent struggle between Fatah and Hamas has also taken its toll on the effectiveness of national-level coordination between the National and Islamic Forces' committees.

One of the consequences of the deepening spatial regime in the West Bank and the escalating Israeli agenda of punishment is that a political and social "division of labor" is taking shape whereby different locales assume varying social and political functions and significance. While certain places, such as refugee camps, continue in their changeless burden of resistance to the unending regime of deadly raids and arrests, others have been marked as sites for the articulation of new forms of civil resistance, often in cooperation with international and Israeli solidarity groups. Strategically situated military checkpoints and certain villages, such as Bil'in in the Ramallah district, Umm Salamuna in the Bethlehem region, and others in the north, have become new arenas of confrontation and resistance. The separation wall still being built in the West Bank has emerged as a symbol of Palestinian dispossession, its sheer magnitude making it a destination for international and Israeli activists.

Another consequence of the new spatial status quo is the sharpening of place-specific identities and ambiances. The smaller cities of the West Bank, such as Qalqilya, Tulkarm, and Jenin, suffer especially from the impact of the separation wall, unemployment, and the flight of businesses. The once-thriving city of Nablus, the West Bank's historic center of trade and production, is besieged by a ring of military checkpoints and violated by near-daily incursions by the Israeli army. Armed resistance is a staple feature of Nablus's relationship to the Israeli occupation. Normal life is increasingly difficult in this desolate landscape; the flight of many of the city's businesses and professionals, who have relocated to Ramallah and Jordan, is the subject of much commentary among business people, intellectuals, and politicians discussing the fate of this once-flourishing center of political and commercial life.⁸ The old center of Hebron has become a ghost town where armed colonists rule the streets with protection from the Israeli army. While the city of Hebron hosted the inauguration of its first modern supermarket in August 2007, it is still an enclaved and insular city, no longer an active participant in the dynamic national politics of two decades ago.⁹

East Jerusalem, once the center of political organizing and cultural life and still the capital of Palestine in the national imagination, has been encircled, atomized, and rendered inaccessible to the rest of the West Bank except by difficult-to-obtain passes issued by the Israeli military. In this situation, the city's social and political elite has not been able to articulate a coherent strategy of resistance and has lost its leading political role. In this it has been supplanted by Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority and of the major PLO political factions.

Ramallah suffered a concentrated regimen of sieges and assaults between the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000 and the 2004 death of Yasir Arafat, besieged in his Ramallah stronghold until his last days. Now, though not spared the Israeli army's lethal forays and almost daily waves of arrests, Ramallah has acquired the reputation of a "five-star prison," with a decided emphasis on the "five-star" rather than the "prison." In fact, Ramallah today, especially as the Israeli regime of control intensifies, is viewed increasingly as an oasis of normalcy (and decadence) in a desolate landscape of shattered urban spaces and violated rural expanses. Much of the popular analysis attributes this state of affairs to the hegemonic influence of a corrupt elite comprising influential figures in the Palestinian Authority, the business sector, and NGOs based in the city. In reality, however, Ramallah's urbanizing trajectory long predated the Oslo regime and can be traced to the first decades of the last century.

THE MAKING OF A MIDDLE-CLASS PROJECT

Ramallah/al-Bireh's fortunes and misfortunes have long been bound up with the movement of people—the influx of refugees and other migrants and the emigration of natives. The twin towns entered the twentieth century as villages, but Ramallah in particular was endowed with two important features that were to prove critical for its future development as a regional market town and administrative center (and a home to the middle class): the presence of a sizeable number of foreign-based, church-related institutions, and the beginning of emigration to the Americas. The few available histories of Ramallah, mostly written by natives and émigrés, emphasize its Christian identity through the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ The establishment of Christian institutions in Ramallah was not without consequences, however. The early establishment of international Christian institutions in Ramallah led to its social differentiation from al-Bireh. The educational opportunities at the church-sponsored schools facilitated emigration from Ramallah, which imparted an element of distinction to the town and gave it a social and economic advantage. Social distance between the two towns increased, reflected in educational levels, modes of dress, and lifestyles.¹¹

The arrival of the British in Palestine in 1917 and the establishment of the Mandate five years later marked a decisive moment in the history of the towns. A not-insignificant number of Ramallah residents were employed in the Mandate

bureaucracy. By the early 1920s, a building boom was underway that lasted well into the 1930s, attracting increasing numbers of workers and craftsmen. Under the impact of the construction boom, financed in large part by remittances from the towns' émigrés, building styles began to change. Modern concepts in the design of domestic space were reflected in several buildings of this era, such as the 'Elayyan home in al-Bireh.¹² Buildings increasingly were characterized by a new urban style. *Hamula*-based quarters (*barat*), which had formed the core of the original towns of Ramallah and al-Bireh,¹³ began to lose their social distinctiveness as residents dispersed outwards from the town centers, building mostly along the main arteries linking the towns to surrounding villages.

But the key turning point in the modern history of Ramallah/al-Bireh, as indeed of other towns and cities in Palestine, was the 1948 Nakba. The war ushered in tremendous transformations in Palestinian urban life. The most devastating of these was the irreversible vanishing of Arab urban life as lived by Palestinians in West Jerusalem and in the coastal cities of Jaffa and Haifa. For the smaller and less cosmopolitan towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the major effect of the Nakba was the influx of internally displaced refugees who remained within the borders of Mandate Palestine. In 1953, a Jordanian census recorded that 67 percent of Ramallah's 13,500 inhabitants were refugees.¹⁴ The vast majority of refugees who made their way to Ramallah/al-Bireh in the hot days of July 1948 were peasants from villages near al-Lidd (Lydda), Ramla, and Jaffa who settled—often after several temporary relocations—in al-Bireh, Qaddura refugee camp, and later in Am'ari and Jalazon camps.¹⁵ A smaller group of refugees consisted of middle-class families (both Muslim and Christian) from the coastal towns themselves. Many of the Christian migrants settled in the environs of Ramallah's old town core.

At the same time, the Nakba accelerated the pace of emigration among natives of the two towns. Ramallah historian Naseeb Shaheen notes that at the end of the mandate regime in 1948, some two hundred Ramallahis who had been employed by Mandate institutions suddenly found themselves jobless.¹⁶ This, along with a favorable change in American immigration policy and the presence of family members already settled there, encouraged the emigration of more Ramallah and al-Bireh natives to the United States.¹⁷

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the influx of refugees following the war. Still, although the native middle class of traders, shopkeepers, former Mandate employees, and a few professionals was depleted by emigration, the continuity of the middle class was retained through the arrival of urban refugees from al-Lidd, Jaffa, and Ramla. The middle class component was strengthened during Jordanian rule (1950–67), when Ramallah began to attract increasing numbers of professionals and government employees. Private (and some public) educational institutions, including Birzeit

College in the nearby village of Birzeit, played an important role in augmenting the middle class. After the 1970s, emigration to the Arab world, particularly to the Gulf, was also critical, primarily because the remittances sent by working family members helped improve living standards and educational levels at home.

During the first two decades of occupation, and until the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987, emigration, the colonial relationship with Israel, and expanding educational opportunities were the main engines of the changing class structure of the West Bank and Gaza. Modalities of engagement with the Israeli economy were varied, but in general they were to be found in wage labor in Israel, labor subcontracting, and retail trade. Incomes rose in real terms, and for the refugees of the camps, work in Israel became a primary source of income.

The role of higher education in the crystallization of a Palestinian middle class has been noted elsewhere.¹⁸ Ramallah was one of the most important sites in this process, not only in attracting students from all over the West Bank and Gaza to its several educational institutions, but also because it was the most hospitable site for the relocation of many graduates of these institutions. In addition, it was in the ambience of Ramallah that many youths from villages first experienced the heady mix of politics, urban lifestyles, and different sensibilities.

Many of the diverse influences that have come together to make the present reality of Ramallah/al-Bireh were thus in place by the 1970s. There is no question, however, that the establishment of the Palestinian Authority after the Oslo accords in 1993 was another watershed in Ramallah's journey from small village to central city for the Palestinians in the occupied territories. The import of the Oslo accords is considered to be primarily political; however, the new regime that ensued from the accords had far-reaching social effects as well, particularly for the kind of place Ramallah was to become.

REPRESENTATIONS OF RAMALLAH: FROM "FIVE-STAR PRISON" TO "GREEN ZONE"

Seven years into the second intifada and the intensification of the spatial regime of cantonization, Ramallah's status as a city apart has been consolidated. Since 2000, it has become more socially heterogeneous than it was at the onset of the Oslo process. In reality, and despite its small size, Ramallah is acquiring most of the attributes of contemporary metropolises in the region, including a visible globalized lifestyle and new sensibilities whose most enthusiastic carrier is the aspiring new middle class. This is happening despite the fact that death and destruction are not far away; in some respects, the new urban ethos in Ramallah is reminiscent of the mythic resilience of Beirut, a war-ravaged city that nevertheless "knows how to live."

Western and Israeli journalists have been the most enthusiastic promoters of the new Ramallah, focusing on its cafés, restaurants, theaters, fitness centers, and cultural venues; wonderment that Palestinians are capable of intelligible

lives pervades these journalistic writings. Ramallah is variously depicted as proof of the resilience of the middle class, the victory of globalization, the defeat of the resistance, or of the PA's ability to assure normalcy in a time of conflict and strife.

Palestinian sentiments about the city tend to be strong and are themselves indicative of emerging political and social divisions. Part of the intelligentsia views Ramallah as the promising incubator of a cosmopolitan and secular ethos, while another despises it as the seat of a corrupt and capitulatory elite. Ramallah also elicits bitterness and anger among ordinary people as a city prospering at the expense of the marginalized zones in the new spatial regime.

Joseph Massad's scathing indictment of Ramallah is a commentary on the city's new role in Palestine's emerging landscape:

Ramallah proper (excluding the surrounding villages) continues to be what many now refer to as the Palestinian Green Zone, sheltering, in addition to the intelligence staff of Israel and Israel-friendly Arab countries, those Palestinians who are paid and protected by the Oslo process, whether the Oslo bureaucracy, its technicians and hired intellectuals, or the business and middle classes recently habituated to the new name-brand consumerism that the Green Zone can offer. This opulent life contrasts with the life of the rest of the Palestinians outside Ramallah who live in misery, hunger, and under the bombardment of the Israelis and the attacks of savage Jewish colonial settlers, not to mention the harassment by Fatah.¹⁹

A cadre of the People's Party in Far'a refugee camp near Nablus expresses popular sentiment in this depiction of Ramallah night life:

The nights of Nablus, Rafah and Jenin are very different from the nights of Ramallah . . . the Ramallah night is deep red, not from the blood of the martyrs who fell in defense of the land and of our honor, but from the doings of the knights of chatter and greedy chiefs vying for power and a piece of the cake. The night begins with a search for the best restaurant or hotel to exchange gossip about promotions and to brag about acts of heroism . . . A tragedy in Jenin is occasion for stealing the funds earmarked for its healing; a *nakba* in Rafah is an opportunity for competition between elites; and a catastrophe in Nablus is a subject for long hours spent in meetings.²⁰

While such sentiments and representations provide rich ammunition for animated polemics, they do not capture the everyday lived reality of the city. In particular, the critique misses the social import of what is transpiring: the fact that for some time now Ramallah has been on an urbanizing trajectory, becoming more like a city, with all its complexity, contradictions, and possibilities.

Without doubt, the establishment in the wake of the 1993 Oslo accords of the much-excoriated PA hastened this process: Its arrival led to the surprisingly rapid elaboration of a new globalized urban middle-class ethos and lifestyle, which found its most hospitable terrain in Ramallah and its most ardent articulators and advocates among the new middle class, including veterans of the political parties. Ramallah, having long since lost its native sons and daughters and therefore not burdened with an entrenched local elite (such as was left largely intact in Nablus and Hebron, for example), was taken over by the PA's new political administration with its many security apparatuses and departments. Many of the new higher-ranking bureaucrats were PLO figures allowed to enter the West Bank and Gaza after decades of exile. These returnees (*'a'idin*), while small in number, made their imprint on Ramallah's cultural and social scene through their outlook and lifestyles, all of which contributed to the elaboration of the urban and modernist ethos they had imbibed in Beirut, Tunis, and other Arab cities.

It is true that the new Ramallah was made possible by the investments of local and expatriate capital, but the modern, globalized ethos and lifestyle on display are embodied and articulated by the rank and file of the middle class in everyday social practices in actual places. I would note parenthetically that, as in the rest of the Arab world, the ideal of a "modern life" is not new in Palestine and was embraced by the small urban middle class in Jaffa, Haifa, and Jerusalem before the Nakba and in the inland cities of Nablus, Ramallah, and Bethlehem in the same period and afterward. But the expansion of the middle class, due mainly to higher education and emigration in past decades, has thrust new sectors of society into the modern mode. Critical decisions about presents and futures and the quality of lives confront individuals with increasing urgency.

The sites where modern sensibilities are acquired include private schools, music academies, cultural centers, and other important nexuses of social interaction such as theaters, fitness centers, cafés, restaurants, upscale supermarkets, and a miniature mall. The most strategic of sites for the elaboration of modern subjectivities are educational institutions, if we conceive of education broadly as the acquisition of critical kinds of knowledge, competencies, and dispositions. While Palestinians have long been noted for their dedication to education, the determined pursuit of new forms of cultural and academic capital distinguishes the new middle class's fervor for the "right" educational experience for its children from the aspirations of peasants or refugees of past decades. Competence in foreign languages and Western cultural protocols is critical here. As in other Arab countries where private schools (and increasingly, private universities) use foreign languages in instruction, so, too, the best schools in Ramallah aim at making foreign languages, primarily English, second nature to the children of the middle class, many of whose parents are recent migrants from villages and other towns in the West Bank (some are from Gaza).

While the experiences of students remain restricted and local, the determined pursuit by the new middle class of enrichment for their children through studying arts and other skills ensures that they are able to compete in

globalized cultural and academic markets. For example, at the Quaker-run Friends Boys' School (actually a coeducational school) in Ramallah, the local matriculation examination track (the *Tawjibi*) has not had any takers for the past two academic years; most of the students opt for the International Baccalaureate program instead. In this school, English is a core part of the curriculum, and many school activities have a strong international flavor.

No other city in Palestine has such an eclectic and diverse middle class, which has given Ramallah/al-Bireh its unique character. There is plenty of evidence of increased migration from the rest of the West Bank to the city in the past decade, particularly from the northern regions (the results of the second Palestinian census of December 2007 can be expected to verify this observation). Most migrants are employees of the PA and other public institutions, workers in the building trade, and owners of businesses. Many of them—especially those of modest means—have settled in newly developed parts of the town and in adjacent villages that are being rapidly incorporated into the urban center.

One of the contributions of Ramallah's middle class has been the articulation of a secular and modern outlook, in flagrant contradiction to both the hegemonic culture of resistance of the national movement since the 1970s and the Islamist vision that has gained currency in Palestinian society in recent years. Ramallah's historic Christian identity is relevant here: Despite the emigration of most of the original Christian families and the fact that the majority of the population is now Muslim,²¹ the Christian association is an important ingredient in the construction of the city as it is imagined today.

Paradoxically, by asserting the Christian identity of the city, the intellectuals, professionals, business people, and others who have hitched their fortunes to Ramallah are in fact underlining its secularism. They want Ramallah to be more like Beirut and Cairo than Hebron or Jeddah.²² This tendency highlights the problematic linking of Christian identity and social and political outlook. A prevailing perception in Palestine holds that Palestinian Christians are less socially conservative than Muslims, primarily in matters having to do with the public conduct of women and relations between women and men. This representation ignores class and regional factors. The residents of 'Ayn 'Arik and Tayyiba, two predominantly Christian villages in the Ramallah region, for example, probably have more in common with their fellow Muslim villagers than they do with the Christian upper-class residents of Masyoun. It also bears mention that certain groups of Muslims who settled in Ramallah (a prime example being the returnees) had just as much—if not more—to do with enhancing the secular outlook of the town as the Christians did. Nonetheless, the official myth of the city's Christian identity persists and has played an important role in engraving Ramallah's place in the Palestinian imagination as an open and cosmopolitan city. Such notions also have their practical uses: for example, Ramallah's café and restaurant culture is vitalized by the fact that alcohol licenses can be granted to restaurants there, while they are not allowed in adjacent al-Bireh.

A POLARIZING CITY

The arrival of the PA also had important consequences for the physical appearance of the city, as property laws and zoning regulations were changed to allow for the ownership of individual units in apartment buildings and the construction of multi-storey buildings. The skyline of Ramallah changed dramatically in the decade following the Oslo accords; the signature red-tiled roofs of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century houses gave way to the bulldozers, and those that were spared found themselves hemmed in by apartment blocks and office buildings. With incoming investment, new villas were also built.

A note about scale and quality is in order here. In Ramallah (as in the rest of the occupied areas), there is no equivalent to the opulent lifestyle of the super-rich in the Arab world's major cities; the Palestinian bourgeoisie was dispersed far and wide in 1948, and not all of the few wealthy Palestinian entrepreneurs investing in Palestine today have their homes there. Indeed, the villas of Ramallah that elicit ridicule are more like the homes of middling entrepreneurs in Amman or Cairo than the fabulous palaces of local popular imagination. The middle class is also small, consisting mostly of employees and functionaries of the public and NGO sectors, with a growing cadre of business and other professionals.

The changes in zoning regulations, the rise in land prices, and the availability of housing loans and commercial building schemes had important social dimensions as well: One of the more noteworthy effects of the post-Oslo urban regime in Ramallah has been the deepening of residential segregation and the salience of place-based class and status differentials. Different kinds of neighborhoods began to appear, ranging from choice areas such as Masyoun and Tireh to more popular (*sha'bi*) settlements on the outskirts of the towns.

The better-kept and better-serviced areas are out of bounds for the lower middle class of public employees, shopkeepers, and white-collar service and clerical workers. These segments of the middle class may have had a chance to realize their dream of an apartment in a new neighborhood, but more likely than not, these lower-middle-class neighborhoods have become desolate places with little greenery, poor public services, and few amenities or public facilities. A new neighborhood with the unseemly name of Umm al-Sharayit is one of these areas: a sprawling settlement housing a hodgepodge of badly kept apartment buildings, public facilities such as PA ministries, commercial establishments, *sha'bi* restaurants, automobile repair shops, and wedding halls.

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A better appreciation of the growing social disparities that have deepened since the 1990s can be gleaned from an examination of the changing relationship between the city and its underclass in the refugee camps. Three camps have figured prominently in the life of Ramallah: Am'ari, Qalandia, and Jalazon.

Another smaller (and unofficial) camp is Qaddura, in the heart of the Ramallah commercial district, which is actually more akin to an impoverished neighborhood of the town than a camp set apart from the fabric of the city (as Am'ari). Thanks to its central location, Am'ari occupies an important place in the life of Ramallah/al-Bireh, not least because it has presented itself as a unified community vis-à-vis the two towns, particularly al-Bireh, on whose lands the camp is located and to which many of the camp residents have moved following improvements in their financial condition. Historically, Am'ari for the middle class of Ramallah (households, merchants, community institutions, the municipality) has meant different things: a reservoir of labor (notwithstanding employment in Israel, which provided more income to camp workers during the 1970s and 1980s), the object of charitable works, a site of resistance to the occupation, and an address for politicians to approach—for instance, during electoral campaigns—for political mobilization or to demonstrate dispute resolution skills. Even as a zone of exclusion stigmatized by Ramallah's middle and upper-middle class, Am'ari nevertheless served as a surrogate conscience for the very same social groups in a different era. During the first intifada, for instance, the towns' prosperous merchants—highly mindful of their duty to support the resistance—paid their political dues by supplying the camp with food and provisions during the long sieges (a practice that also involved nearby villages and the Jalazon camp).

In the 1970s and 1980s, despite the tensions inherent in the juxtaposition of a community of dispossessed refugees and a differentiated town, several factors worked against open conflict between the camp and the surrounding urban area. Prior to Oslo, the reigning nationalist orthodoxy downplayed social disparities, denounced the flaunting of wealth and privilege, and discouraged a culture of “normalcy” in the face of occupation and repression. This was especially the case during the first intifada, when expressions of frivolity were discouraged (if not banned), and an ascetic culture of resistance informed by peasant or imagined peasant values was hegemonic. Under these circumstances, unity in the face of a common enemy muted the deep-seated antagonisms between the camp and the town.

This picture of relative coexistence between the camps and the town began to change with the installation of the PA. As social cleavages deepened and Ramallah became Palestine's premier city, the language of coexistence began to change. Several incidents, strongly reminiscent of classic acts of urban violence in world cities where the dispossessed attack the perceived symbols of privilege and power, have occurred in recent years.

RECASTING RESISTANCE, TRADITION, AND RESILIENCE

The growing cleavages between the camps and Ramallah/al-Bireh are reflected in the less tangible yet very real tension between the middle class's engagement with modernity, secularism, and globalization on the one hand

and the ascetic culture of resistance (a product of the national struggle in the 1970s and 1980s) that continues to be the dominant ethos among most Palestinians on the other. The fact that the occupation regime deepens its hold on Palestinian land while the struggle against the occupation continues without any breakthrough contributes to the hegemony of the ethos of resistance in Palestinian society in general.

Resilience and steadfastness (*sumud*) have been staples of the Palestinian ethos for generations now. *Sumud*'s incarnations have been many, but the dominant motif has been Palestinians' determination to continue under adversity, fortified by their roots in their land, the strength of their traditions, and family and kin solidarity. *Sumud* has had a dull and unglamorous history, however: Martyrdom, imprisonment, and exile have been its backdrop, and it is difficult to envision *joie de vivre* as one of its elements. While this motif continues to hold sway among vast sections of the population, including the new middle class (which may invoke it on critical occasions), a new conception of resilience has been taking root, one that is not based on an ascetic denial of frivolity, joy, or entertainment, but rather renders the very pursuit of happiness a manifestation of resilience and of resistance at the same time. The legendary resilience of Beirutis, who are perceived as living life to its fullest despite the turmoil of war and strife, is certainly an inspiration here. Yet while some sections of the Lebanese middle class may not feel the need to ennoble its pursuit of happiness by casting it as a form of resistance, Ramallah's cultural elite and its functionaries, more accountable to the force of popular opinion, must be ever so vigilant in maintaining the delicate balance between old and new cultural sensitivities lest they appear to be abandoning the duty of resistance.

The tension between new and orthodox sensibilities can be discerned in the attitude toward folklore. In the hegemonic nationalist ethos, "folklore" is sacrosanct, and much of the cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s glorified peasant values, leading a Palestinian cultural critic—not surprisingly a returnee—to lament the "adoration of folklore" in Palestinian national discourse.²³

One of the most urgent tasks of the middle class has been to elaborate a new cultural sensibility, at once responsive to the obligation of resistance and to the need for a normalization of life. Its intellectuals and other cultural workers provide the ideological scaffolding for this enterprise, but the rank and file—the consumers of the new culture—are its true practitioners and articulators. Balancing between these two imperatives involves being at peace with "folklore" but open to global cultural currents. In Ramallah's contemporary cultural scene, emphases on resistance and authenticity wane or surge according to the severity of Israeli assaults.

In a keynote address at the silver jubilee of El-Funoun, a Ramallah-based dance troupe, the critical intellectual Azmi Bishara went further than most intellectuals in his critique of the Palestinian engagement with heritage and folklore. To him, the obsession with folklore and heritage is in fact part of a

colonial and Orientalist project, and the Palestinians would do well to recognize this colonization of their minds:

While the occupier celebrates its monopoly over modernity and progress, it does not mind at all when our heritage is occupied by folklore and Orientalism. I salute you for breaking this rule which they hoped to dictate to us, after they had destroyed in the Nakba a fledgling Palestinian project of modernization.²⁴

Omar Barghouti, a choreographer at El-Funoun, explains the difficult process that led this maverick dance troupe to liberate itself from the heavy baggage of the national ethos:

Throughout the 1980s and during the first Palestinian intifada, resistance meant nourishing the roots and expressing the attributes of Palestinian national identity that had been suppressed by the Israeli occupation. Starting in the mid 1990s, however, El-Funoun's mission has transformed itself. The group found that preservation and survival were no longer sufficient—to create and participate in forging a contemporary cultural identity became more urgent. To this day, El-Funoun respects Palestinian heritage but also explores, absorbs, and integrates modernity. The challenge is to intervene in the development of Palestinian identity, to critique stagnation, capitulation and despair, to envision a new, modern identity that is rooted, yet in dialogue with life, with progress, with universal rights and freedoms. At first, El-Funoun suffered turbulent internal debates and a great deal of soul-searching until it established a crucial link between authenticity and contemporariness.²⁵

* * *

As with all other trends in Palestine, one cannot be certain whether the urbanizing trajectory of Ramallah will be aborted or allowed to continue. It appears, however, that the inexorable forces of globalization and urbanization—and concomitant globalized middle-class lifestyles—are penetrating all corners of the world, even those most peripheral to the urban system, and even in localities marked by war, conflict, and pronounced vulnerability. Despite the realities of colonization and military occupation, and in the absence of a state, Ramallah/al-Bireh's nascent middle class partakes enthusiastically in the trans-Arab urban middle-class ethos elaborated in centers of Arab modernity—Beirut, Cairo, Tunis, and of late, Amman and Dubai. Paradoxically, this ethos is not unfolding in the context of postcolonial state formation, but rather, in the shadow of its exact opposite: the fragmentation of the nation and the rapid demise of the Palestinian state-building project. This very fragmentation, however, may have enabled an “enclave city” whose sights are more fixed on the outside than on the fractured nation within.

NOTES

1. John Dugard, the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the OPT, has noted that the number of checkpoints, including roadblocks, earth mounds, and trenches, increased from 376 in August 2005 to 540 in December 2006. These checkpoints divide the West Bank into four distinct areas: the north (Nablus, Jenin, and Tulkarm), the center (Ramallah), the south (Hebron), and East Jerusalem. Within these areas, further enclaves have been created by a system of checkpoints and roadblocks, while highways for exclusive Israeli use further fragment the OPT into 10 small cantons. Cities are cut off from each other as difficult-to-obtain permits are required for travel from one area to another. See United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, John Dugard," A/HRC/4/17, 29 January 2007.

2. Ramallah and al-Bireh continue to be two administrative entities, each with its own municipality and municipal council. However, the social and physical boundaries between them have all but disappeared, and attachment to distinctive town identities survives only among the "original" natives who today constitute a small proportion of the population. Al-Bireh has a somewhat problematic relationship with Ramallah, having been marginalized and sidelined both culturally and politically. In current usage, the term Ramallah generally subsumes al-Bireh.

3. Ghazi-Walid Falah, "The Geopolitics of Enclavisation and the Demise of the Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Third World Quarterly* 26, No. 8 (2005), p. 1343.

4. Leila Farsakh, "Independence, Cantons or Bantustans: Whither the Palestinian State?" *The Middle East Journal* 59, No. 2 (Spring 2005), p. 245.

5. Jeff Halper, "The 94 Percent Solution: A Matrix of Control," *Middle East Report*, No. 216 (Fall 2000), p. 19.

6. Falah, "The Geopolitics of Enclavisation," p. 1344.

7. Sari Hanafi, "Targeting space through bio-politics: The Israeli colonial project," *Palestine Report* 10, No. 32 (February 18, 2004), p. 4.

8. For a vignette of Nablus under siege, see Beshara Doumani, "Scenes from Daily

Life: the View from Nablus," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, No. 1, pp. 37-50.

9. A survey conducted in Hebron's city center by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) and B'Tselem in 2006 found that at least 1,014 Palestinian housing units (representing almost 42 percent of the units in the area) had been vacated, of which 65 percent had been abandoned since the start of the second intifada. The survey also found that 1,829 of the area's Palestinian businesses (nearly 77 percent of the total) were closed. See ACRI and B'Tselem, "Ghost Town: Israel's Separation Policy and Forced Eviction of Palestinians from the Center of Hebron." Jerusalem: ACRI and B'Tselem, May 2007 (see Settlement Monitor in *JPS* 144).

10. Azeez Shaheen, *Ramallah: Its History and Its Genealogies* (Birzeit: Birzeit University, 1982); Naseeb Shaheen, *A Pictorial History of Ramallah* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1992); Khalil Abu Rayya, *Ramallah: Ancient and Modern* (Ramallah: American Federation of Ramallah, n.d.); Yusuf Qaddura, *The History of the City of Ramallah* [in Arabic] (Ramallah: Rafidi Printers, 1999).

11. I am indebted to Saleh Abdul-Jawad for sharing with me these insights and his knowledge of and documents pertaining to the social history of al-Bireh in an interview in February 2007 in Birzeit.

12. Diala Khasawneh, *Memoirs Engraved in Stone: Palestinian Urban Mansions* (Ramallah: Riwaq and Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2001).

13. Many buildings in Ramallah from this era are documented by Ju'beh and Bishara in their architectural history of Ramallah. Nazmi Ju'beh and Khaldun Bishara, *Ramallah: Architecture and History* [in Arabic] (Ramallah: Riwaq and Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2002), p. 26.

14. Shaheen, *Ramallah*, p. 27. Shaheen gives the following figures for the population in Ramallah in the twentieth century until just before the Nakba: 3,214 in 1905; 3,104 in 1922; 4,286 in 1931; 5,000 in 1941; 6,300 in 1944. He also notes that by 1946, approximately 1,500 of Ramallah's original 6,000 residents had emigrated to the United States. This migration accelerated after 1948, and by 1960 there were over 4,000 Ramallah-born

people in the United States. By 1975, the number had exceeded ten thousand, while less than two thousand remained in Ramallah (Shaheen, *Ramallah*, pp. 28–29).

15. Some of the more intriguing and little-investigated questions pertain to the variable experience of these two groups of refugees. Which refugees ended up in refugee camps in the Ramallah area and beyond (most notably in camps in the Jordan valley), and which were absorbed into the social fabric of the towns? What kinds of capital enabled some refugees to move out of the camps and neighborhoods in which they eventually settled, and what was the temporal and spatial trajectory of this movement? What were the avenues for social mobility available to refugees? In interviews conducted during a research project with which I have been involved, middle and upper-middle class refugees in Ramallah and al-Bireh have invariably stressed the fact that they arrived in Ramallah with nothing; however, studying their life stories, one is struck by the social mobility experienced by some of them. Others remained locked within the confines of the refugee camp or other poor neighborhoods.

16. Shaheen, *Ramallah*, p. 27.

17. Ramallah natives established three important organizations in the United States, which, in addition to providing a sense of community in the diaspora, were instrumental in maintaining contacts with the home town. Al-Bireh's emigrants to the United States, about whom less is known, established the al-Bireh Palestine Society. Their philanthropy is a source of pride to Birawis both in the United States and in al-Bireh. Several of the town's institutions, most importantly its schools, were established and maintained by this society.

18. Jamil Hilal, *The Palestinian Middle Class: Research into the Confusion of Identity, Authority and Culture* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies and Muwatin,

the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, 2006); Lisa Taraki and Rita Giacaman, "Modernity Aborted and Reborn: Ways of Being Urban in Palestine," in Lisa Taraki, ed., *Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance, and Mobility under Occupation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006); Lisa Taraki, "Urban Modernity on the Periphery: A New Middle Class Reinvents the Palestinian City," *Social Text* 95, forthcoming.

19. Joseph Massad, "Pinochet in Palestine," *Al-Abram Weekly Online*, No. 819 (9–15 November, 2006). weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/.

20. Khalid Mansour, "The Night of Ramallah and the Night of Jenin," *Al-Watan Voice*, 17 August 2004. www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/ (in Arabic; accessed 1 September 2007).

21. Figures from the 1997 census indicate that 32 percent of the city's population was Christian; if we include the al-Bireh population in this count, the percentage would be considerably lower. See Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Population, Housing, and Establishment Census, Final Results: Ramallah City*, City Reports Series 005 (Ramallah: PCBS, 2000).

22. A returnee intellectual's defense of the dream of a secular and liberal Ramallah in the face of populist and Islamist currents expresses this sentiment well. See Hassan Khader, "Such a Dream Deserves to be Defended," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), 1 January 2006 (translated from the German). www.kibush.co.il/.

23. Zakaria Muhammad, *On Palestinian Culture* [in Arabic] (Ramallah: Muwatin, the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, 2002), pp. 43–49.

24. Quoted in Omar Barghouti, "Dancing Tragedies and Dreams," the *Daily Star*, 27 October 2004. www.dailystar.com.lb.

25. Omar Barghouti, "Dancing Tragedies."