

Excursion to Jerusalem Nov 27 – Dec 4 2021

(Report and Photos by Nadia Amor, Franka Lorenz, Lina Zimmermann and Philipp Schloz)

Saturday, Nov 27: Arrival

Our group of 4 students and Prof. Schneider arrived in Jerusalem in the evening, where we were welcomed by our project partner Dr. Munir Nuseibah.

Sunday, Nov 28: Sharia Courts in Ramallah – Exploring Ramallah

On our first day we drove from Jerusalem to Ramallah. We left the city of Jerusalem via the Qalandia checkpoint. There we experienced what it means to cross a checkpoint and how the Palestinians must feel who have no other choice than to go through such a checkpoint every day. In the direction of Ramallah, we were able to pass the checkpoint very quickly, in the other direction the traffic jammed for kilometers.

Our first stop was the Supreme Judge Department. There we met Somoud Damiri, she is the Chief Prosecutor for personal status at the Sharia Court, Palestine and judge of the Sharia Court of Appeal in Ramallah. Together with Somoud Damiri we met Mahmoud Habash. Mahmoud Habash is Mahmoud Abbas's adviser on religious and Islamic affairs. He is also the Palestinian Authority's top Sharia judge. We sat together in a small conference room next to his office. After we introduced ourselves, he told us more about his work and tasks.

Then we drove to another Sharia Court that is located in the Palestine Liberation Organization Department of refugee affairs and met the judge Rashid Salhab. He is a family judge on the 2nd Palestinian Legislative Council. We visited him in his office, and he also told us about his work and tasks. He gave us a lot of his time and answered many of our questions.

On the way to our next destination, we took a short tour of Ramallah by car and drove past the important Palestinian political and judicial buildings in Ramallah, such as the Constitutional Court and the PLO General Unions.

Our next stop was the Dar Zahran Heritage Building. The Dar Zahran Heritage Building is an attractive, historic building with a unique history. For 250 years, this building has been the property of the Ramallite Dar Zahran Jaghab family, serving as a family home, guest chamber, and the place of residence of Ramallah's Mukhtar (leader), the head of the town. It includes an art gallery and a photo gallery of Ramallah from 1850 to 1979.



After a short lunch break in a small typical Palestinian restaurant, we visited the Yasar Arafat Museum. It was built on the grounds of his final battle, his last command center and headquarters. Yasar Arafat's mausoleum is also located there. We had a guided tour through the museum that shows the Palestinian history and the story of Arafat's life, including his fight for a Palestinian State. The exhibition was focused on the Palestinian perspective and painted a one-sided picture of the Israeli-Palestine conflict with Israel as the aggressor.

On the way back we did not drive through the Qalandia checkpoint, as the traffic there was jammed again for kilometers.

Monday, Nov 29: Al-Quds University

The third day's program included a visit of Al-Quds University, the Faculty of Da'wa and Religion, the Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic, and a meeting with the university's Executive Vice President Prof. Dr. Hassan Dweik. Afterwards we went on a tour to see "the wall" and to visit the Bedouin Community Jabal Al-Baba.

The main campus of Al-Quds University is located in Abu Dis. Abu Dis adjoins Jerusalem but does not belong to the city of Jerusalem, they are physically separated by a concrete wall, known as "The Wall". Our group visited the Faculty of Da'wa and Religion, or Shari'a Faculty, where we met with Professors, who are responsible for Shari'a studies are Qur'an studies, Da'wa, Islamic Finances and Economics, legislation and jurisprudence. After we introduced ourselves, we learned some general information about the faculty, its history of origins and establishment. During the conversation, different approaches to studying and teaching Islam and Islamic law were discussed.

After the meeting with the dean and the professors of the Da'wa and Religion Faculty we went to see the Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic and talked with Dr. Munir Nuseibah and Dr. Ahmad Amara about the project and their work. The Human Rights Clinic exists since 2006 and teaches students at Al-Quds University about human rights and international humanitarian law. The students learn to spot, document, and report human rights violations. The Clinic cooperates with several organizations, among them Al-Haq, Addameer and Defence for Children International – Palestine Section, which were declared as terroristic groups by the Israeli government. Munir and Ahmad expressed their concern towards us about this classification and explained that it means a loss of support and safety for their project because three associated organizations are marked as terroristic and therefore might lose their reputation and backing.

We were told at the Human Rights Clinic, that the situation for teachers and students at Al-Quds University is not easy, many people face problems on their way to university because they have to cross a checkpoint or take diversions to reach the campus because of The Wall. Some people at Al-Quds described their situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory as "Apartheid". It was clear that those Palestinians really felt like they are victims of an Israeli "Apartheid system" but as students and academics with a rather impartial view it was difficult to react to such a statement. On one hand, "Apartheid" is a defined term which describes, according to the Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (bpb), the segregation of White and Black people in South Africa and the discrimination of the Black community until 1991 and is intrinsically tied to the history of South Africa and the culture of Black people (cf. bpb). So it is not easy to apply the term to the issues of the Palestinian people, at least not without any changes in the definition. On the other hand, to describe Israel's actions as "Apartheid" is an extremely serious critique and accusation against Israel.

The meeting with the Executive Vice President Dr. Hassan Dweik was not only highly interesting it was also very enjoyable. Dr. Dweik told our group some private anecdotes but also talked about his feelings towards the occupation and the situation of Palestinian universities. Palestinian universities and academics stopped to interact and cooperate with Israeli universities to set a politically sign against the occupation of the Palestinian territories. The hope was to get international attention from academics and universities that would pressure their governments to exert influence on Israel to ease its politics and actions against Palestinians. The same hope was expressed towards our group. Even though those actions were not successful until now, Dr. Dweik was optimistic that someday there will be a state where Palestinians and Israelis can live as equals with Jerusalem as the capital city. But he clearly opposed the suggestion from Donald Trump's peace plan to build a Palestinian capital city in Abu Dis.

After we left Al-Quds University, Munir and Ahmad showed us The Wall that was build next to the campus. They explained that the Israeli government planned to build the separation barrier through the campus but changed their mind after protests from the university and international critique.

From there we drove to the Bedouin community Jabal Al-Baba, which means Mountain of the Pope. The community leader told us that their land is called Jabal Al-Baba because it belongs to the Vatican and the Vatican allows the Bedouins to live there and encourages them to use the

place to make a living. They built a park and a playground that people from the city can visit against a small fee to have picnicks or barbeques and a kindergarten. Compared to other Bedouins they are doing fine, the community leader told us. The Israeli government wants the Bedouins to leave the open land and move into cities, but this is not acceptable for them because it is their tradition to live in an open area even though they are not able to follow their livestock and water sources freely anymore. The Bedouins of Jabal Al-Baba live in small cabins, made out of corrugated sheet iron, wooden panels and other random things. It does not make sense for them to build more permanent homes because often Israeli bulldozers come and tear the cabins down but nevertheless, they do not want to leave their land.



Tuesday, Nov 30: Bethlehem and Surroundings

The tour planned for the day started at the "Wall Hotel" in Bethlehem; the hotel associated with the graffiti artist "Banksy", which is located directly at the barrier to Israel, and which is the center of contemporary culture in Bethlehem. The group met there with the guide who led the excursion through Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

The group walked from the hotel along the Barrier Wall, which is located right in the center of Bethlehem. In Bethlehem in particular, the Barrier Wall has become an object of tourist and artistic attraction, as it cuts directly into the city, making it a particularly striking feature of the cityscape and explicitly pointing to the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. The barrier wall at this part of the city, also served artists as a surface of creation, including the famous graffiti artist "Banksy".

From the wall, the guide led the group to "Star Street", the most important street in the city for tourism and culture. In the context of tourism, the guide pointed out the major economic

problems in the city caused by the Corona virus: Work and economy in Bethlehem and the region is largely based on tourism. Due to its disappearance, due to the Corona virus, many residents of Bethlehem have suffered great economic losses. According to the guide, this has caused many tourist guides and shopkeepers to leave the city and even the country.

Through "Star-Street", the group went further into Bethlehem's city center to the Church of Nativity, the city's most famous site. The timing of the excursion from Göttingen was very appropriate for the visit of the religious sites of the region. For the Church of the Nativity, this was not only the absence of many tourists, which made it easier to visit. Also, at the beginning of the Corona pandemic, renovations inside the church were finished, which had been ongoing since 2013. Thus, the important sacred places in the church could be visited undisturbed. Among these is the birthplace of Jesus, located at the bottom of a staircase. The shrine commemorating the birthplace, meanwhile, is not exactly at the birthplace, but next to it.



Inside the church, the difference to similar European churches became evident. While European churches emphasize distance of visitors from furnishing, art and relics, this seemed to be the case to a lesser extent in the Church of the Nativity. Most sacred sites were not protected by barriers or marked with notices about physical distance. This may not assist the monument preservation, but the experience of the immediacy is greater.

After visiting the Church of the Nativity, the group and the guide were able to have lunch in Bethlehem; including falafel, hummus, and yogurt - also Palestinian heritage.

Bethlehem's history has also made it the home of many Christians. Some Christian organizations, such as the YMCA (YMCA - Young People's Christian Association) can also be found in Bethlehem. The next event of the day's excursion was a visit to the YMCA Bethlehem.

The director started his presentation by introducing us to two important projects of YMCA Bethlehem. The first project is called "Joint Advocacy Initiative". For this, the YMCA invites groups from abroad to Bethlehem to help families in the surrounding area harvest olive trees and in the process give an impression of the Israeli occupation. According to the director, the YMCA also works with the BDS (Boycott Divestment Sanctions) initiative. His presentation here was very limited to projects related to the problem of occupation. This impression was reinforced by a question that followed, where the issue of increased tensions between immigrant Muslim families and the Christian population of Bethlehem was raised. He noted that he had not taken notice of this. The enormous focus that Palestinian organizations (including the YMCA) place on the occupation, often caused discussion within the group during the excursion. The main problem was that the narrative of the conflict was only reflected from the Palestinian point of view and that the work of civil society was "almost" only concerned with the issues of the occupation and thus seemed to ignore internal social issues.

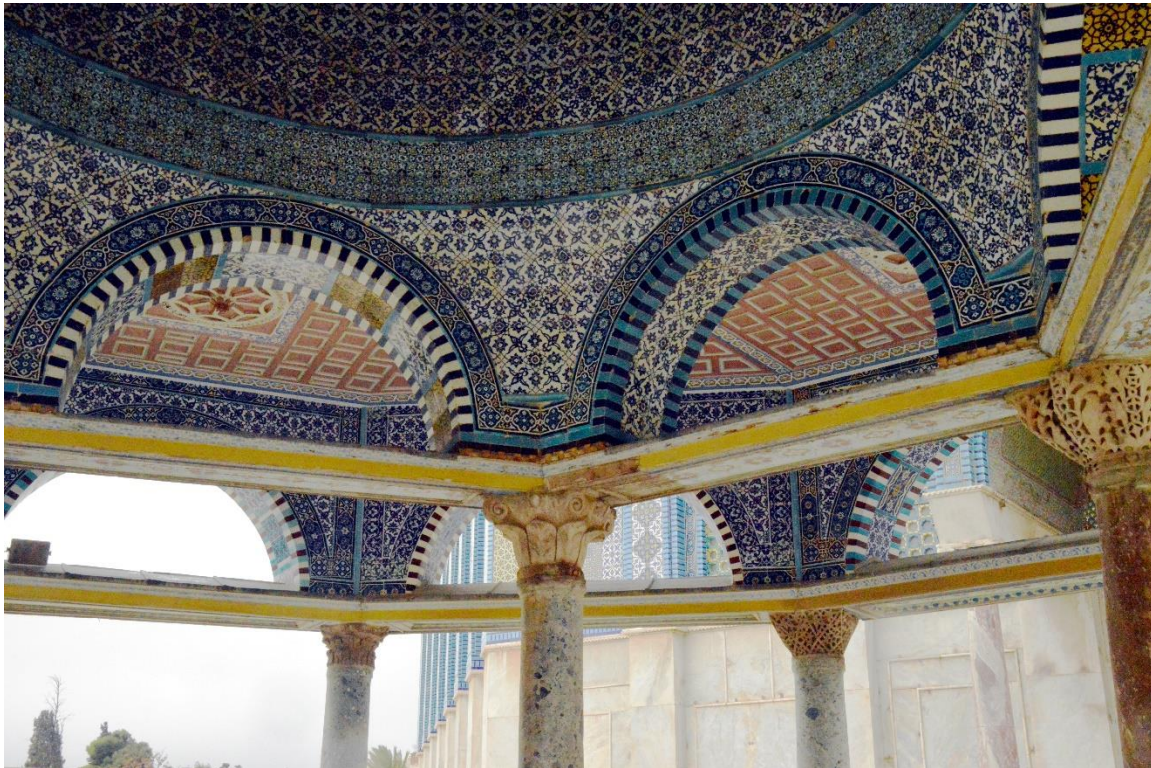
Afterwards, the excursion continued to the refugee camp "al-Dahesha", also located in Bethlehem. This camp was established during the Nakba in 1949. Initially, the Palestinian refugee camps consisted of tents. Until today, however, entire housing complexes have been built on their ground, as in al-Dahesha. Dahesha is completely embedded in the city and can hardly be distinguished from its surrounding area. Most striking was the density of living space in the camp. Less than one square kilometer is inhabited by almost 13,000 registered refugees. The problems in the camps are manifold; one of the biggest is the high unemployment rate among inhabitants. The excursion to Bethlehem ended with a visit to the village of Fuqin in the surrounding area. Special about the village is its proximity to an Israeli settlement, which is located right next to it and is impressively visible. The guide explained to the group the problems faced by the villagers in connection with the settlement. Among other things, the settlers would discharge their sewage into the fields of the villagers of Fuqin. He also said that there had been attacks by security forces against villagers and that the settlement's garbage was regularly dumped on the village's land. The settlement is located on an elevation and thus towers above the village. This sight is impressive from the perspective of the village and has an intimidating effect. The settlement here is just one of several that surround Bethlehem.

The end of the excursion was all the more contrasting when the Göttingen group, outside Fuqin, met Palestinian women who invited them to a small meal and drinks. In the shade of the

settlement, some conversations could be held and the Palestinian hospitality proved itself once again. The day in Bethlehem, often full of contrasts, ended rich in contrast as well; and most of all: satisfying.

Wednesday, Dec. 1: The Old City of Jerusalem

This day was the first day in the city of Jerusalem. In the morning, we visited the Temple Mount in the Old City. We had a guide with us, and we got the permit to enter the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque. Both buildings are impressive from the outside and from the inside as well. We started our tour under the “small Dome of the Rock”, which served as model. The guide told us about the different entrances (gates), and the gilded dome of the building. First, we entered the Dome of the Rock and admired the Islamic architecture from the Umayyads and the Byzantines. We got the possibility to look closer at the different inscriptions and the different kinds of architecture, for example the wooden ceiling construction. We took a closer look to the pattern, in which you could see interesting differences over time. We were also allowed to enter the building of the al-Aqsa Mosque and got specific explanations of the building, for example of the different kinds of pillars and some historical events. Moreover, we received a short tour in the museum, which is also located in this area and exhibits old Quranic scriptures and dumped devices, for instance old doors from the Dome of the Rock. During our stay on the Temple Mount there was a provocation from Jewish settlers, they sang and danced loudly in front of the entrance of one of the gates. Even though we were all aware that such incidents happen every day, it was different to see it with our own eyes and it made us feel stunned and shocked.





Afterwards we had a meeting with the Qadi al Qudat Dr. Wasif al-Bakri, acting Supreme Judge of Jerusalem, likewise at the Temple Mount. He explained to us his work, as well as the responsibility of the Sharia Court. We asked him questions about the recognition of the different Sharia Courts at the West Bank and the Jordanian and Israeli Sharia Courts in Jerusalem and about the issue of the gate of *ijtihād*. He answered all our questions comprehensively and detailed.

Our lunch took place in the Community Action Center of the Al Quds University (CAC), which is situated in an 800-years old building, originally a church in the old city of Jerusalem. During lunch, we had a talk with our Palestinian project partners, who work there, about their tasks at the CAC. First and foremost, they support Palestinians who live in Jerusalem with legal help, for example with cases of family unification or child registration. They give these people legal assistance, explain to them the legal situation or translate Hebrew documents. The CAC aims to empower the disadvantaged Palestinians of East Jerusalem to access their rights and entitlements and negotiate the bureaucratic procedures.

At the afternoon we did a tour through all four quarters of the old City of Jerusalem, namely the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Armenian. The focus of this tour was on historical buildings and architecture, not on politics or the current situation of the city. Our guide showed us the characteristics of the Mamluk architectural art and explained to us how it is different from the architecture of the Crusaders. We visited several stations of the Via Dolorosa and the church of the last Supper, which is located in the Armenian quarter. In the times of the Crusaders, it served as a church, under the rule of the Ottomans the building was converted into a mosque. At the end of the tour, we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the guide showed us the different areas of the different Christian denominations and explained their role in this church.



Thursday, Dec. 2: Old City and Civil Society Organisations

On this day we met with Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway, visited the Al-Sarayah Community Organization in the Old City and the youth organization Burj Al-Laqlaq.

Our Group, and Dr. Munir Nuseibah met Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway at the Community Action Center in the Old City of Jerusalem. Dr. Abu Sway is professor at Al-Quds University and holder of the chair for Al-Ghazali studies, that are located in the Old City on the Haram Al-Sharif. He told us about his professorship and his teaching methods, which were quite unusual for German students. Dr. Abu Sway does not like to focus on grades and testing his students but rather concentrates on teaching them a critical view and understanding of texts.

At the Al-Sarayah Community Organization we were greeted by two young employees who gave a tour through the building and told us about the purpose of the organization. Al-Sarayah offers many different courses, private lessons, workshops, trips, and summer camps, not only for the children living in the Old City but also for their families. While a big part of the program is focused on the education and support of children and teenagers, there are also several seminars for adults and especially women. In these courses, women are supported to find and improve individual skills and interests, for example a talent for painting or hair and make-up styling and learn how they can be financially independent with their skills and open their own businesses. The Al-Sarayah building does not only contain several rooms for courses but also a hair and make-up salon, where courses are taught, an art studio, a room with computers and a library. We were told that the organization offers courses for children and teenagers of all ages and with all

interests. The children get also support in their daily life in the Old City and help to deal with living under occupation. Our guides explained to us that it is not easy for children to grow up in the Old City, on the one hand, there is no space for them to play and just hang out and be children, and on the other hand, many children feel the pressure of living in a divided city, of the military presence and clashes between Israelis and Palestinians.

The second youth organization we visited that day was Burj Al-Laqlaq. It is located on the fringes of the Old City and impresses through its size. After walking through the narrow alleys of the Old City it was surprising to see how big the compound is. It contains not only a big yard and a building with offices, course rooms and a sports hall, but also a pottery, a playground, a computer lab, and several playing fields for soccer or basketball. Burj Al-Laqlaq offers a kindergarten for the small children and after-school activities for the older ones, including several sport, media and creativity programs. The founder of Burj Al-Laqlaq told us that the organization also works in the technical field and developed a number of apps and a free Wi-Fi in the Old City. One of the apps is made for tourists and shows descriptions and information of sites in the Old City. In their pottery studio, the organization offers courses for everyone and sells their own handmade products.

After this visit we spent some time in the Old City and went to see the Austrian Hospice with its amazing view over the city and the Dome of Rocks and enjoyed Austrian apple strudel.



Friday, Dec. 3: The village of Lifta

The visit of the abandoned and destroyed village “Lifta” on the 3rd of December marked the last day of the group-travel to Jerusalem and its surroundings.

The group drove to the outskirts of Jerusalem, where they met with our guide. Umar works for the Israeli organisation “Zochrot”, that tries to highlight the Nakba in Israeli society, as an important and tragic event in their history. The guide led the group through the village on this day.



Lifta is located in a steep valley, near to a highway leading in and out of Jerusalem. Nowadays, the area of the village is used as recreational area for Jerusalemites. This became clear during the visit of the Göttingen group. On the way to the ruins of Lifta, many people were seen, apparently relaxing or hiking. The path to the ruins of the village is steep and not easily accessible. At several points the guide stopped to give the group the historical context of the village of Lifta and the Nakba. He also spoke about the hotel that is located directly above the abandoned village. According to him, the hotel is unreflective about the history of the village and thereby its own: The Nakba is not mentioned on the hotel's website, while it talks about the "beautiful landscape" that can be enjoyed from the hotel's rooms. This represents one aspect of the Palestinian view of the Nakba, which was evident during the field trip and was also a topic on this day. The guide frequently criticized the Israelis' treatment of the Nakba. Its existence and taking place would be concealed in the Israeli discourse and would hardly be discussed. The contrast between the abandoned Palestinian houses and the vacationers seemed to reinforce this image. After a short descent into the valley, the group reached the beginning of the village, marked by ruins of no longer inhabited houses - an image that applies without exception to the entire village.



Lifta, in its pre-Nakba days, was conveniently located. Due to its proximity to Jerusalem's Old City, the villagers could have easily offered their products at the market in the city center. According to al-Jabri, this ensured the prosperity of the villagers. Lifta was thus a village, above average wealth, which was also evident in the construction of the buildings, which can still be seen: many windows with round frames and partially ornate roof structures are signs of this. The guide further explained the progress of the village with the beginning of the Nakba in 1948. According to him, the village was divided into an upper and a lower part ("upper-Lifta, lower-Lifta"). According to the guide, the coffee house in upper-Lifta was attacked at the beginning of the Nakba by Zionist paramilitary units of the "Hagana", "Irgun" and "Lechi".



In the course of these attacks, the first villagers of Lifta were killed during the Nakba. As a result, the upper part of the village was abandoned by the villagers. Due to further attacks by the paramilitary units, also in the lower part of the village, by the middle of 1948, all the former inhabitants left the village of Lifta. Later, Israelis settled in the village, although only for a short time. For the longest time after 1948, however, the village was abandoned. The guide continued to guide the Göttingen group through the village. The houses are mostly overgrown and/or partially destroyed. The guide pointed out, that the holes in the ceilings of the houses, were caused by attempts by the Israeli side to make the houses unusable after the expulsion of the villagers. The route also led to the abandoned former mosque of the village. Like other houses in Lifta, the mosque is used by young Israelis as a place to drink or celebrate. According to the guide, this represents the disrespectful way Israeli society treats the heritage of Palestinian culture in what is now Israeli territory. This would also be marked by the situation of Lifta today: According to the will of the Jerusalem municipality, the village should have been demolished and new housing should have been built on its ground. Through the initiative of organizations like Zochrot, this could be stopped and the preservation of the village Lifta as a piece of the culture of remembrance of the Nakba could be maintained. The Göttingen group considered the visit of Lifta as a very impressive and important part of the excursion, especially because the ruins of Liftas have been preserved until today. In connection with knowledgeable explanation, the tour was able to show the Nakba more vividly than books could do. Zochrot, which means, “remembering” in Hebrew, is an Israeli NGO established in 2002 and located in Tel Aviv. The main aim of the organisation is to promote acknowledgement and accountability for the ongoing

injustices of the Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948. Furthermore, Zochrot promotes the return of Palestinian refugees as a compulsory reparation. They want to bring awareness to the broad Jewish public about the topic of the Nakba.

Zochrot is committed to helping the Israeli Jewish public shed its prejudices. The NGO works to bring a change in consciousness and a political and cultural change. To achieve this goal, Zochrot seeks to initiate a process in which Israeli Jews reflect and rethink their identity, their history, their future, and the discourse that ensues and encourages to reevaluate this. For the organization, it is important to pass on knowledge about the Nakba to the Jewish public because of their practical and moral responsibility for the Palestinian exodus and their privileged position of power under the current regime.

To implement its goals, they do different things. For instance conferences, tours, design materials (for example maps) and offer workshops. One of their current main project is the application “inakba”, which is supposed to give the user important information about each place, which also comes from Israeli archives. The app is available in three languages- Arabic, Hebrew and English and based on GPS.

It should be also noted that there is no cooperation with Israeli schools or universities because this is not permitted. In this context, we also talked about the “nakba law” this law authorizes the Ministry of Finance to impose financial sanctions on organizations or entities that celebrate Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning and to withdraw support from the state.