The House on the Border

Aziz Haidar

1 Introduction

This paper features the story of a house as reported in 2017 on Facebook by a Palestinian woman from Jerusalem. It demonstrates the importance of closely examining the relationship between two politically conflicted populations: the Jewish community on the west side of the city and the Palestinian community on the east side. To frame this story properly, the paper begins with an assessment of how the relationship between the two populations has – or perhaps better put – has not undergone scholarly examination, before the story will be reported in full.

Research on Palestinians, citizens of Israel and the Palestinian territories, is mostly Israeli research, so it is important to follow its development and the trends of change it has undergone. The research, its contents, assumptions, methods, interpretation of its results and their use constitute an indication of the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the population studied. The nature of these relationships is also reflected in the disregard and ignorance of important issues for understanding reality in everyday life.

This paper focuses on a neglected but important issue in the relationship between the occupier and the occupied in the city of Jerusalem. It is the issue of the relationship between the two populations living in both parts of the city and, in very few cases, in mixed neighborhoods.

The study on Palestinian society in the Occupied Territories since 1967 was a continuation of the study on Arab-Palestinian society in Israel before 1967. To a large extent, the study in the two populations is very similar in terms of the topics

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and issues studied, the issues that disappeared from the researchers’ eyes and the professional identity of the researchers involved in this study.

Research on Palestinian society in Israel has developed in three stages. The first — between the first days of the state until the 1970s — was characterized by a clear division of labor between a few Israeli orientalists, who undertook research on this society, and the Israeli sociologists and anthropologists, who hardly dealt with the subject (Haidar 2004). During this period, the research focused on the study of political organization, the trends of change in the political positions of the Palestinian population, the formation of national identity, and patterns of protest and struggle. Some work also dealt with the processes of modernization both within a ‘traditional cultural-social and religious’ structure that is ‘permanent and unchanging,’ and a substance that is fundamentally different from ‘modern’ Israeli society.

The first phase of the study of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, after 1967 is identical to the first phase of the study of the Palestinian citizens of Israel in terms of being orientalist in nature and focusing on the same questions and issues. Research on the Palestinian population moved to a second phase in the late 1970s when criticism of dominant approaches and research methods began to emerge. This was part of the general critique of the study of Israeli society which sought to shake off the connection between the state and the establishment and the sociological-anthropological research in Israel (Ram 1993). The criticism was directed at both orientalist and social science research.

Critical sociology in Israel positioned itself ahead of “institutional sociology,” which had been almost the only school in sociological research in Israel until the late 1980s (Mizrachi 2017: 73). At this stage, the study of Arab-Palestinian society in Israel had undergone a change in terms of disciplines and fields of research due to the entry into this field of research of social scientists and Palestinian researchers, from diverse fields, and the adoption of critical theory. But this development did not occur in the study of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories beyond the Green Line. This work is stuck at a stage that is a mixture of the first and the second stage. The critical move in the social sciences uses the Palestinians as a basis for a critical examination of Israel and Israeli society, a critique of various dimensions of Israeli culture and Israeli society (Rabinowitz 1998: 194). Despite this, there is still a commonality in the study on the two populations, namely, the disregard for the nature of the relationship between the Palestinian and the Jewish-Israeli population in daily life.

The third stage in the development of research began in the early 1990s. From this point on, the study of Palestinian society in Israel is established, becomes interdisciplinary and converges mostly into the critical theoretical position (Ram 1993). Research on Palestinians across the Green Line has continued to focus primarily on the study of political behavior, leadership and document research.

Characteristic of the study at all stages is that it ignores the relationship between the two populations. Both the orientalist and the critical approach bypassed the phenomenon of relationships at the local level; instead, research focused on the macro-political research and organizations, the impact of ‘modern’ Jewish society on
‘underdeveloped traditional’ Palestinian society, and responses of the Palestinian population.

The absence of the relationship between the two societies in everyday life from the existing sociological and social research indicates significant blind spots, both in that which existed in the first decades of the establishment of the state of Israel, where a state perspective was adopted, and in the critical approach that emerged later. The tendency to examine Palestinian society and define it first and foremost through its relationships with the Jewish majority society, whether these are perceived through the modernization approach or through the critical stance, has led to ignoring the internal social dialectic that takes place in Palestinian society as a product of these relationships.

The lack of research on the internal dynamics and relationships between the two populations has contributed to the trend of blurring the connection between Palestinians and Palestinian territory, alienation and primitivization (Shohat 1989). It integrates this concern at best into the Israeli discourse of alienation (Rabinowitz 1998: 196), the discourse of testimony that works to separate the Jews from the non-Jews, conditionality in the definition of identities of both sides, and conditionality of the difference, and use of a religion that has greatly increased in the last two decades. The liberal intellectual discourse that began to show appreciation for the cultural difference of the Arab-Palestinian and, thus, used cultural preservation as a method of isolating the Palestinians (Rabinowitz 1998: 202) contributed to this trend.

One recognizes that scholarship regards the phenomenon of the existence of personal and social relationships between Palestinians and Jews in everyday social contexts of labor and commerce along with deep hostility between the two camps at the political level as an anomaly in the liberal discourse that emerged in Israel beginning in the 1980s (e.g. Bronstein 2015; Mizrachi 2011). This is due to the fact that liberalism presupposes continuity and consistency between society and the state, and in relation to what is done in different social spheres in the life of each individual (e.g. work, society, family, politics). This expectation is based, first and foremost, on “the sanctity of the individual in liberalism: Life, therefore, produces cross-border continuity between all spheres” (Fisher 2015). On the other hand, it seems that it is precisely the protection of collective boundaries for life spheres (such as family and community) that creates the infrastructure for good neighborly relationships and mutual respect between different groups in the traditional communal worldview.

These issues of relationships and boundaries are even more important when living in a mixed city such as Jerusalem. The study in Jerusalem was expected to be different in this respect from the study of Palestinian society in the territories.

I will briefly present the main perspectives through which Israeli social scientists approached the study of Palestinian society and relationships between its members and Jews living in Jerusalem. I will point out the blind spots that led to the disregard of relationship research on a personal and social level. First of all, it should be noted that Orientalists still control the study of Palestinian society in the territories and in
Jerusalem. It goes without saying that Oriental research cannot be expected to address the question of relationships at the local level.

The question has, thus, almost completely disappeared from the eyes of the few social sciences researchers who have studied Palestinian society. They have ignored the relationships between residents from the two groups in Jerusalem over the years, although the issue of interpersonal and social relationships is also an essential research site for understanding the real life and relationships developed between Jerusalem Palestinian residents and the Jewish majority.

A reality has developed in Jerusalem in which the Palestinian residents of the city are living under a municipality they did not choose. They are deprived of the right to vote for representatives of the Knesset (Israeli parliament), which determines their fate. And they are in a dilemma regarding their connection to the Palestinian Authority, which has no authority in the city. The reality has been shaped by the complex relationships created between the residents of the eastern part of the city and the Israeli government, on the one hand, and the Palestinian Authority, on the other.

Meeting and activity are created between the residents of the two parts of the city: meeting groups between Israeli and Palestinian neighbors, who sometimes engage in point-by-point struggles without raising comprehensive political demands (Cohen 2007: 138, 141). There were those who expanded their activities in the field of neighborly relationships and other dialogue groups to create a framework for dialogue. Although members of these groups occasionally participated in protests, the organizations were on a local basis and addressed specific issues, and did not form part of the city’s institutionalized political activity (Cohen 2007: 141).

The field of relationships between the residents of the two parts of the city has been examined in several comprehensive studies, most in the context of examining the relationships between Jews and Palestinians in the city at the community level (e.g. Roman 1984, 1992; Shtern 2010, 2015; Shtern and Asmar 2017; Shtern and Vayzer 2021), but these studies do not address the interpersonal relationship level. In fact, the studies that claimed to investigate relationships are also mostly investigations of employment and trade (e.g. Roman 1984; Shtern 2010), organizational and group relationships. The central insight that emerges from these discussions is that the individualistic ontology underlying the liberal imagination of critical sociology clashes with the world of communal significance of the respondents in the variety of contexts. This collision does not allow one to see certain behaviors of interrogees but as an anomaly.

In order to counter this blind spot, I will now turn to the story of “The House on the Border.” The narrative was told by E.A., a Facebook user, who had begun to tell the story of a house located in Jerusalem, and its fate, intertwined with her own and that of her family, since the War of 1967. She began to post in September 2017, and expanded on her initial Facebook post, narrating more and more details that shed light on the complicated, and yet also neighborly relationships between Palestinians and Israelis during and after what she calls “The War of June.” The core
narrative concerning the house is embedded in the most fascinating stories about the impact of war on the lives of a Palestinian family for many years up to our present day.

E.A. posted in Arabic, the set of her posts appears here in English translation, followed by a commentary.

2 War of June

Starting from today, I will recount the story of our home, it is a Jerusalemite house story, a land’s story. The story is long; I apologize to those who do not prefer such stories. It all started during the war of June; my father-in-law, who was a great owner of lands in his village, had finished building a big house consisting of three large apartments. The house was almost finished when the war started, and because the house was close to the armistice line, the Jordanian army, who was situated on the top of the hill next to the house, came down and used the house to store weapons in the basement, and set up the artillery behind it. The war ended fast. And before everyone realized the shock, the Israeli army, disguised in Iraqi army outfits, was standing on the outskirts of the house.\(^1\) They arrested my father-in-law, who was a former Jordanian soldier. His money was confiscated; he was carrying it in his pockets in anticipation of what would happen. They thought he was responsible for Jordanian soldiers’ salaries. He was arrested with another officer in a military car, and the rest of the soldiers in another car. As they were driving, the enemy’s tank clashed with a Jordanian hidden tank and so my father-in-law was able to run away and get to a shelter because he knew the area very well.

11/09/2017

The war ended. The country went down. The displaced in the mountains came back to their houses. My father-in-law came back without anything after they had confiscated his money. He was responsible for a big family, and the situation was really hard. In that period, Jews started coming to Jerusalem, discovering its roads, streets and corners, buying from its markets. You could see many [Palestinian] youths selling antiques and souvenirs from their houses for a living. For my husband and his brothers, they followed a different way for making a living. They were still in school and their elder brothers were studying abroad, so they had to take responsibility; the Jordanian army left boxes of weapons in the basement, so my husband and his brothers used to open the boxes of bullets, emptying the gunpowder from them and selling it to whoever bought. By this, they ensured a respectable living, and [they

\(^1\) F.A.’s assumption that Israeli soldiers were disguised in uniforms of Iraqi soldiers goes along with the conspiracy narratives discussed by Yuval Plotkin (this volume).
resorted to this] especially because they were not able to get the wheat crop from their vast lands, a large part of [the land] was burnt because of bombs.

12/09/2017

The man who used to buy gunpowder from them recognized that the bullets were new, not antiques collected from the streets. The traitors [among the Palestinians] were very cooperative from the very beginning, so this man informed the police, who waited for [my husband and his brothers] close by until they arrived back home and arrested them to lead them to the house. The police continuously announced in speakers that whoever had weapons had to hand them in. My father-in-law did not do this. When [the Israelis] raided the house, they were shocked by the number of weapons they found. As a result, they issued an order to demolish it and sealed it with red wax. Among the forces who raided the house, there was a reserve officer, who was actually a civil engineer, his wife was a Moroccan [Jew] and spoke Arabic; he liked the house, so he secretly offered my father-in-law a deal: he would not demolish the house, but asked to live in it in return. My father-in-law accepted the offer; especially because he had other houses that were rented to foreigners and that were empty because of the war, and the empty houses used to be confiscated as absentee property, and one of the houses had already been confiscated because it was empty. The deal was done, waiting for the family [of the reserve officer] to come.

13/09/2017

The family came to the house: the father, the mother and two daughters. They occupied the house for 35 years; good and sweet neighbors. Trying to be loved by other neighbors, especially, because the mother spoke Arabic. She gave birth to 5 children; who then when they grew up were the worst kind of Jews. One of the daughters got married to an intelligence officer responsible for our area. We started claiming the house back again already in the first years; no was their answer. My father-in-law refused to get rent from them. The journey in the courts had started to get the house back. First my father-in-law, then my husband. My husband became responsible for family matters because his other siblings were living either far away or abroad. That’s why my husband was the one in charge. During his lifetime, my father-in-law distributed his wealth, because all his properties were confiscated for settlements, French Hill, Pisgat Ze’ev, Ramat Ashkol, and nothing was left. This big house was written to be my mother-in-law’s, the other house, also confiscated, was named to be my husband’s. It was an injustice for my husband because his house was confiscated by an Iraqi Jew. When we got married, my

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2 E.A. uses names for neighborhoods in Northern Jerusalem which were used after 1967 when these neighborhoods also grew.
husband confronted me with all the truth, so I promised to stand by his side until this dirty man would leave our home. The first Intifada helped us, anonymous people burnt his car and wrote quotes on the walls of the house, asking him to leave or else he would die. He negotiated with us, either we would pay him, or he would be replaced by a religious Jew. We were able to collect the amount of money with the help of my brother, may God heal him. We lived in the house, we spent huge amount of money to preserve it and then we were ready for getting back the big house.

14/09/2017

To get back to the big house, my mother-in-law renounced the house for my husband, who then became the only person responsible for it after the death of his mother and father. Afterwards, Israel announced the Protection Law which offers everyone who lived in a house before 1968 the protection in the house he/she rented, they could not be evacuated unless they agreed and got paid a certain amount of money. Because the house was very big, the Jew rented half of the house to another officer, which was against the law; this loophole was in our favor. So, our attorney, with a just judge, was able to get half of the house back. But before they left, they destroyed the doors, windows, kitchen and bathroom, so the house would need renewal, and they continued using the other half. We were unable to rebuild the ruins in the second part, which we got back, because that required a huge amount of money. They started teasing us, because we got back half of the house; they tried to run over my son, they hit me, and I was taken to hospital, they accused my husband of burning some of their belongings. We entered into a state of war in which they were the stronger side. At the same time, my husband’s brother, a doctor, came back from Spain for which he had left his family for 25 years. He only came back with our nagging (me and my husband) after we found his address, for my mother-in-law wished to see him for one last time before she died. When he came back, he was drowning in problems and divorced, but he was rich. My husband asked him to come back to the homeland, he offered him the house to live in it, he only had to rebuilt it. He accompanied him to the Ministry of Health to give his papers. He accepted the offer, and my husband renounced [ownership] of the house for him officially. We waited for his promise to rebuilt the house, but he did not. He returned to Spain and the house was left for 10 years; the taxes compiled and everyone knows how expensive the taxes are in Jerusalem. All the taxes for 10 years were in my and my husband’s name; we had to pay them because [the brother] did not live there.

However, we were shocked when he came back behind our backs and put the house up for sale. He visited us many times, stayed in our house, we took care of him, tried to explain [to him] why it was important to get the house back
from the Jews. When we used to ask him to pay the taxes and repair the house, he always claimed he had a bad financial situation. Which was a lie. We could not do anything, because the house was officially written in his name. To return to the other half of the house; the Jewish family still lived there; the father was dead, the children were adults now; they either went abroad, or lived in their own apartments in West Jerusalem, and the mother was left alone. The second Intifada had started.

15/09/2017

The lonely Jewish woman began to feel afraid, she was now alone in the big house. One time, she was leaving her house and was shocked by an air strike near my house. I was sitting on the balcony, I ran to help her. She thanked me for that and the next day she came to visit me [and brought] a present. Here, I decided to use the situation in order to reach a deal concerning the house. Ramadan began, we welcomed her each day to eat with us, and sometimes she used to come with her daughter. She informed us that she was thinking of leaving the house and getting whatever amount of money she could get from it. According to the law, she could sell the house and take 2/3 of its price and we would get 1/3 of it, then it would be owned by a new owner [neither the Jewish woman, nor E.A. and her husband]. During the same period, the situation served our interests again; Jewish settlers had attacked the house thinking it was owned by Arabs, she called the police for help. Only one day before, a young, masked man had knocked on her door in the night, telling her: “I am from the Black Panther party.” This was enough to force her to run to West Jerusalem. The house became empty. But we could not take it. Then, she announced in a Jerusalem newspaper that she was selling the house. Now brokers, mercenaries and collaborators proliferated to get the house. We would stand up to them and make them understand that this was our home and no one else would take it. At this time, my husband had throat cancer and began a difficult treatment journey that affected the course of our lives. It took a lot of our time, his life was the priority. [The Jewish woman] learned of his illness and expressed great sympathy with him, while later facilitating the path of negotiations.

16/09/2017

While we were busy treating my husband, we were looking for someone to help us. We resorted to the [Islamic] endowments (the responsible institution and director of the Islamic [Waqfs]) and their response was: Give us the right to dispose of the house for fifteen years. Then we would get the right to buy it. So we refused and said it was better to stay with the Jews, for then, at least, we were guaranteed it was ours. Then we resorted to the Palestinian Authority and met one of the veteran ministers. He is still in PA to this day. He sat and put his leg on the other and said to us with a curse: “Do not pay her one
penny. From now until the end of the year, we will have gotten Jerusalem back, and then you kick her with your feet,” and he waved his foot laughing.

The Jews are still in Jerusalem. The worst is that some of the relatives were preparing to pay the amount and take over the house, but we refused. We decided to work on our own. She [the woman who lives in the house] asked to meet us at her new home. She offered us a deal, to pay her half the amount she was offered which was $200,000 and she would hand over the house. She justified this [by saying that] she was doing this because she had not forgotten that I had saved her life and hosted her at my table. After several deliberations, she said: “I am traveling to see my son and spend a holiday in Poland, and I need five thousand dollars to pay the government to cancel the reservations on me,” she had accumulated taxes. My husband gave her the money and she gave us the key to the house and said to my husband: I trust you and I know you will not fool me and act as if you were at home. We respected her promise despite the pressure of all members of the family to take over the house, and when she returned she was happy, because her children were mad at how she had handed us the key and [they thought us] capable of betraying her. We met again in her house, and we agreed with her to pay the amount over a period of four years in which we paid a thousand dollars per month to her, with a down payment of half of the other amount. The lawyer was keen to obtain a written consent from her daughters and sons so that no one would ask us for the house later.

17/09/2017

We started thinking about the $1,000 a month, we were both employees and we had four children in private schools. We decided to rent our house, which we lived in and it was in good condition in order to pay the monthly amount, and move to the house we received, and worked to repair it gradually as much as we could; it needed to recover water and electricity lines, and be painted. Before moving into it, my brother and cousin helped me, so the house became habitable again at their expense. We settled in the big house and started to implement the agreement and pay a thousand dollars a month, and the second half of the amount as a down payment was paid with the help of my family and borrowing from friends. Here the government began asking us to pay the accumulated debt on the second apartment which [my husband] had given to his brother. We received a warrant to reserve our house and our salaries if we would not pay, and even imprisonment. We appealed to [his brother] to come to the country and take responsibility for [his part of] the house. He refused and said that he had some financial difficulties and asked us to solve the problem. We paid an amount to stop the warrant and started looking for a tenant who would renovate the house and live there. After a long effort, we found a
Christian association prepared to pay the taxes and repair the house [to use it] for five years as its headquarters.

E.A.’s story reveals the impression of the first encounter between Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and the Israeli army and the Israeli legal system, and between them and Israeli citizens. It also reveals an important part in the development of relationships to this day. The latter are complicated in most cases, but “The House on the Border” illustrates how such complications unfold over decades. At the core of the events narrated, one can identify the root cause, namely, the ambiguity between personal relationships and formal ones. Simultaneously, the story reveals that personal relationships can be a tool for solving complex problems between the two opposing sides.

The case of “The House on the Border” is revelatory of the fact that the relationship between the strong and the weak, the occupier and the occupied, is multifaceted. There are facets that can trigger ambivalent positions on the part of both sides, based on how personal relationships have unfolded. These bondages may also change as a result of the change in power relationships at the local level; certain events give relative power to the weaker side of the equation or behavior on either side or both of them jostle the relationships.

In the first meeting after the 1967 war, the victorious Israeli side revealed its power in its ability to decide to demolish the house of the Palestinian family, expropriate its money and assets and make the family impoverished. An Israeli army officer could save the house from demolition in return for his residence in the new house, which, in fact, became his property and enabled his family to sell it to the same family – the actual owner of the house.

Empathetically, the power relationships on the ground can change without the influence of real power at the general level being free from the control of formal relationships. This was the case in two occurrences: the first intifada (1987) and the second intifada (2000). In both cases, the Palestinian family was in a position of relative strength because the authorities and the army, which were the source of power of the Israeli family in conflict with the Palestinian family, could not affect personal relationships.

In the first case, the Israeli officer was forced to negotiate with the Palestinian family who returned half of the house to itself. In the second case, the second intifada, the officer’s wife had to give up because she could not face threats. The irony here is that she received threats from religious Jews who thought that a Palestinian family lived in the house. Again, this event shows how complex relationships can sometimes be absurd; but they can also be a tool in solving complex problems. The assistance given by the Palestinian woman to the Israeli woman and her hospitality during the month of Ramadan was the main reason for softening the other’s position and deciding to sell the house to the Palestinian family at half the price she originally demanded.
While maintaining good relationships with the enemies who have been expelled from their homes has solved a complex problem, the story attests to the fact that these relationships have aided the Palestinian family more than the Palestinian authorities could have ever done. Therefore, ambivalence is shown in the positions of the Palestinian. This ambivalence is reinforced by the activities of the Palestinian collaborators, who belong to the same people. After all, because of this affiliation, the other side can deprive them of their homes and assets.

It must be noted that ambivalence is also revealed on the powerful Israeli side when the Palestinian woman helps the Jewish woman even though the latter lives in the former’s dispossessed house.

As it became clear from the story of “The House on the Border,” the exposure of the internal logic of different groups also, in this case, opens new avenues for understanding reality at the local level. People distinguish between different spheres in life and behave accordingly, and the most prominent is the demarcation between everyday life and the political sphere.

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