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Naming the Streets of (Arab) Jerusalem during the British Period 1920-1948

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The use of street names for commemorative purposes in Palestine was first introduced in newly founded Jewish settlements, most notably in bigger urban settlements such as Tel Aviv and later on, in the Jewish quarters of Haifa.¹ The British mandate government established in Palestine in the early 1920s directed both Jewish and Arab municipalities to introduce street names.² From the British perspective, the issue was administrative rather than political. British efforts were especially persistent in the big cities and especially in those where British political and strategic interests were most manifest, most notably in Jerusalem, the capital of British mandate Palestine.

With the exception of Haifa and in contrast to the situation in Jewish localities, Arab localities showed little interest in investing streets with official names that could serve commemorative and hence political purposes. Notably, in Jerusalem it was the British authorities that initiated a grand-scale naming activity. In pre-1948 Jaffa, the Arab city adjacent to Tel Aviv, only seven streets were officially named. Other towns and cities adhered to the traditional mode of popular designations that celebrated local topographical features and traditions and were devoid of political significance.

The objective of this article is to document and analyze the British efforts to determine street names for (Arab) Jerusalem. The analysis focuses on notions of historical and cultural heritage as expressed in the choice of street names. Finally, it offers an interpretative evaluation of this process, placing it within broader ideological and historical contexts. It should be born in mind that the naming procedure analyzed in this article reflected British ideas about the historically correct heritage that the street names of Jerusalem should represent. In this sense the commemorative pattern favored by the British authorities was a colonial one. Importantly, this article examines naming procedures and does not investigate popular responses to official names or the measure of their acceptance by local residents.

Commemorative Street Names: A General Introduction

Street names belong to the urban texture, and their introduction into local geography is a measure of administrative control. The administrative act of naming streets is an example of the appropriation of the public domain by official agencies that have specific political agendas.³ Furthermore commemorative street names and their officially ordained meanings in particular are instrumental in substantiating the ruling sociopolitical order and its particular vision of history in the cityscape.⁴

Commemorative street names are a common feature of modern political culture, even though the utilization of street names for official commemorative purposes is not an obligatory norm. Alpha-numerical street names, as the case of Manhattan so convincingly demonstrates, completely fulfill the primarily practical function of street names, namely: to distinguish between different streets, to provide the users of the city with spatial orientation and regulate the administrative control over the city. The symbolic function of a street name as a vehicle for commemoration is subordinate to the practical function: a basic rule is that no two streets in a city should have one and the same name. Yet the commemorative function is of primary political significance. Its aim is to perpetuate in the cityscape the memory of historical figures and events found worthy of public honoring by the authorities in charge. Barry Schwartz maintained that the procedure of commemoration invests historical events and persons with extraordinary significance and that it provides "a register of sacred history" (Schwartz 1982: 377). Commemorative street names provide such a register in the cityscape, available and accessible to all regardless of the measure of consent or opposition to the selection of commemorative names.

'Historical' street names are distinctive sites of memory (Nora 1984) and of modernity. From the perspective of those in charge of molding the symbolic foundation of society, the main merit of commemorative street names is in that they introduce an authorized version of history into ordinary settings of everyday life. In their capacity as both historical references and spatial designations, commemorative street names provide for the conflation of history and geography. Potentially contested and eventually challenged, commemorative street names concretize hegemonic structures of power and authority.

Naming the Streets of (Arab) Jerusalem

R. M. Graves was the last British Mayor of Jerusalem (formally: the Chairman of the Jerusalem Municipal Commission). He held the job between June 1947 and the end of British administration in May 1948. In the memoirs of his tenure in Jerusalem he noted that "One of the minor defects of the city of Jerusalem - and this applies to the Old and the New City - is the absence of street names".⁵ Graves contended that many streets in the commercial areas of the city had officially ordained names, but deplored the fact that "[I]n the greater part of the town here are no street names and, of course, no numbers".⁶ For Graves, the fact that many streets bore no names was more than an inconvenience. It evinced the failure of the authorities to modernize the city. Yet assigning names to the streets of Jerusalem was more than a practical administrative issue. It was also a political issue since it entailed taking into consideration national and religious sensitivities of and rivalries between different religious and national communities in Jerusalem.

Geographically, Jerusalem was divided between the Old and the New City. The Old City was the historic core of the city. The New City included the new neighborhoods built since the end of the 19th century outside of the walls of the Old City.⁷ To the south-west of the Old City were the German Colony, Katamon and the Greek Colony, which were predominantly Arab. Also to the south-west was Rehavia, a Jewish neighborhood and the adjoining quarter of Talbiyeh, which was shared between Arab and Jews. North-west of the Old City was a Jewish area.

Northward of the Old City were the Husseini and Nashashibi quarters as well as Sheikh Jarrah, all predominantly Arab. To a substantial extent, the geography of the city reflected the ethnic and religious composition of the local population and a mosaic of distinct communities each identified with a specific historical and cultural heritage.

Being the capital of British Mandate Palestine, Jerusalem enjoyed a special status. Moreover, as a holy city for three religions, Jerusalem was laden with historical associations and religious sensitivities. These facts compelled the British authorities to take a special interest in the naming of Jerusalem's streets. This was already evident in the activities of the 'Pro-Jerusalem Society' founded after the British occupied the city in World War I. The society was committed to the improvement of Jerusalem to the benefit of its residents in accordance with its historic and religious importance. Accordingly, the society, which was presided over by the British governor of Jerusalem, proposed a set of names that reflected the history of the city, rather than a particular communal heritage and political ideology, with a special emphasis upon the history of the Crusaders, the former Christian-European rulers of Jerusalem. Thus, this list of commemorations included both Saladin, the 'liberator' of Jerusalem from the crusaders, and Baldwin, the ruler of the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, both in the area of the new Arab Jerusalem, north of the Old City.

As the 'liberator' of Jerusalem from the rule of the crusaders, Saladin encapsulated Muslim, and by extension Arab, commitment to Jerusalem as a Muslim holy city that should not be ruled by non-Muslims. A prominent Muslim historical hero, Saladin embodied an important and contemporary Arab political myth that was strongly affiliated with the Islamic aspect of Arab identity and which, in the contemporary context of its evocation, was permeated with anti-British and mainly anti-Zionist sentiments.

From the historically objective perspective favored by the Pro-Jerusalem Society, whose main concern was the history of Jerusalem, these two historical figures were rendered congruous rather than mutually exclusive. This British approach favored history over political mythology, and hence the latter was substantially subdued. The importance of this was in that it enabled a modus of naming that could be acceptable to all the communities of Jerusalem.

Later on, the municipality of Jerusalem, where the city's three main religious communities were represented according to a pre-ordained arrangement, attempted to introduce new names for the main thoroughfares of the city. Among the names approved by the municipality prior to 1938 was the King George Street. Other names, mostly pertaining to the Hashemites, the Arab dynasty ruling Iraq and Trans-Jordan and allied with the British Empire, e.g. 'King Ali Road', 'King Feisal Road', 'Ghazi Road' and 'Amir Abdulla Road', were approved but not in use.

In 1938 the municipality attempted to regulate Jerusalem's street names by appointing a special committee, the Street Naming Committee (hence: SNC), to deal with the subject. Its members reflected the religious composition of the municipal council, and accordingly included Christians, Jews and Muslims.⁸ The SNC was advised by a special Jewish sub-committee, with the intention

that Arab "learned gentlemen" would also participate in an advisory capacity. While the Jewish sub-committee was actively involved, the Arab advisors "failed to attend to this matter".⁹ In 1938 an appropriate municipal by-law was issued to legally regulate the naming of streets.¹⁰ In 1939 it was suggested that the director of the Department of Antiquities should be nominated as chairman of the SNC.¹¹

The guidelines concerning the naming of streets were formulated by the municipal council of Jerusalem in its meeting on December 23, 1940 in accordance with the recommendations of the SNC.¹² In this meeting it was decided "not to name streets after living persons except in extraordinary cases to be agreed upon by the council". Furthermore, the majority of the members of the council recommended "to name streets after important persons and persons considered to be on the historical plane". The minority view was that except for extraordinary cases, only names that pertained to the history of Jerusalem should be approved. The implication of the decision was that 'history' was not limited to the history of Jerusalem, but could also reflect particular communal versions of history which, in the political context of the period, were proto-national.

The geographical juxtaposition of contingent versions of historical heritage was further ensured by the decision "to divide the city into three zones, each predominantly Arab and Jewish and the third mixed; to invite the Arab members of the committee to propose suitable names for streets in their zone and the Jewish members in their zone. As regards the mixed area the whole committee was to propose suitable names".¹³ This proposal meant that in the nationally homogenous areas, each national community was autonomous regarding the selection of street names.

The objections raised by the Jerusalem municipality against specific recommendations of the SNC highlight the delicate maneuvering necessary in such a policy. Most notably such objections were against names which fell outside their "communal" jurisdiction. For example, Jewish members of the council suggested an alternative street for the famous Arab geographer Ibn Batuta, since the street was in a Jewish neighborhood. Arab members of the municipal council proposed to change the name of Baldwin Street "after an Arab personality since it passed entirely through an Arab area". Both Jews and Arabs rejected the name "Godfrey de Bouillon Str.", which commemorated a king of the crusader kingdom on the grounds that the name was foreign to local residents. They suggested "to name this street with a name which could be more easily pronounced".¹⁴

In the summer of 1945 the British government dissolved the municipal council and in its stead a British commission was set up. In October 1945 the new municipal government launched a new initiative to name streets in mainly Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem. This spate of activity lasted till mid 1946. The proposals of the SNC were prepared by an Arab and a Jew and a representative of the Department of Antiquities as advisors, and presided over by a British representative.¹⁵

The official policy was that "As far as practicable it is desirable that the names chosen should

relate to historical associations and the character of the town as a Holy City to the three faiths whose adherents are found throughout the world".¹⁶ The SNC, however, redefined the criteria in such a way that in addition to the importance assigned in certain areas to the history of the city itself, the composition of the local population was also acknowledged as a factor to be reckoned with. In particular, it was decided that the "past history and the nature of the population resident in them" should also be taken into consideration. This amounted to a reaffirmation of the principle of communal autonomy agreed upon previously and already practiced in the Jewish parts of the city.

The main focus of the work of the SNC was to name the streets in the Old City. As a special zone, the 92 names officialized were mainly traditional and vernacular.¹⁷ The Arab areas outside of the walls of the Old City included those north of the Old city (Sheik Jarah) and the new neighborhoods south-west of the Old City, such as Katamon, Bakaa and Talbiye, in which a substantial number of middle class Christian Arabs resided.

In accordance with the policy of the SNC, the street names selected evinced a supra-communal heritage that included both Arab-Muslim historical figures and Byzantine-Christian Emperors and prominent fathers of the Christian church. The decision to name the thoroughfare leading from Herod's gate northwards "Haroun el Rashid Street" commemorated the Abbasid Caliph (786-809) in Baghdad who figured prominently in early Arab-Muslim history.¹⁸ Similarly, naming a street after Tariq, the Arab-Muslim conqueror of Spain in the early 8th century, celebrated the military expansion of the Muslim caliphate in its formative period.¹⁹ Naming streets after Ibn Khaldoun, the 12th century Arab geographer, el Muttanabbi, Ibn Shaddad, Ibn Sina or al Maarri celebrated the golden age of Muslim-Arab culture.²⁰ Modern representatives of Arab culture included writers and poets e.g. el Rasafi (Iraq, 1875-1945), el Manfaluti (1876-1924) and Muhammad Abdu (Egypt, 1849-1905).²¹ Altogether, prior to 1948 Jerusalem's Arab street names celebrated a pan-Arab cultural heritage; interestingly, no local Arab-Palestinian personalities were included.

Significantly, such street names that celebrated the golden age of Arab history were imbued with a predominantly Islamic accent. The Christian aspect of Arab-Palestinian identity was not articulated in terms of Arab history or culture but by a direct reference to the early history of the Church. Thus, streets and roads in the Arab neighborhoods of south-western Jerusalem were named after fathers of the early Christian church, such as Procopious, Sophronios, Nicodemos, St. Saba, Jeranimos, St. Euthmios, St. Jersimos, St. Porphyros and St. Nikophoros.²²

The versatile character of the historical heritage that was officialized by the SNC was evident not only in specific commemoration but also by spatial juxtapositions that amounted to statements in their own right. Naming a thoroughfare in western Jerusalem "Omar Avenue"²³ celebrated not only the Caliph Omar el Khattab (584-644) who played a major role in expanding the Arab-Muslim realm, but also referred to Jerusalem's own history. Omar was the builder of the 'Omar Mosque', a central Muslim shrine on the Temple Mount. Interestingly, however, the commemoration of Omar was geographically adjacent to that of Justinian, the Byzantine Emperor of the 6th century who had been a prominent builder of Christian, pre-Arab Jerusalem.

Another road was named after Heracleus,²⁴ the last Byzantine Emperor who ruled Palestine. The defeat of his army in 636 ACE in the battle of Yarmouk paved the way for the Arab-Muslim rule of Palestine. Yet in Christian tradition Heracleus was celebrated as the defender of the faith who recovered the Holy Cross, the most revered among Christian relics, from the Sassanid Persians who conquered Byzantine Jerusalem in 614 ACE.

The historic heritage commemorated by the SNC acknowledged both communal histories and particularistic concerns and emphases, and attempted to transcend them within the framework of the history of Jerusalem as a coherent framework acceptable to the different national and religious communities. Yet for some reason it was decided not to name streets after "Biblical or similar legitimate ones to be generally acceptable to all parties and communities".²⁵ Legitimate names were such that were "historical generally" or "commemorative of important events (battles, treaties etc.)".

Adhering to the history of the city while avoiding names that could be especially offensive to a particular community - Jewish, Muslim or Christian - served to balance different or conflicting interests. The profound concern of the British authorities for Jerusalem as a holy city for the three major faiths resulted in the formation of a unique historical heritage that both acknowledged the interests of different national communities (Jews and Arabs) and satisfied British notions of an appropriate representation of history. In this manner, the Arab street names that were approved by the SNC did not represent a particular Arab-Palestinian identity. Arab-Muslim historical and cultural heritage was introduced into the cityscape, yet any direct references to current political concerns of Arab-Palestinians as a separate political community were absent. Since no geographical street names were introduced, no territorial context or historical geography was implied as a marker of identity, and Arab identity was defined solely in terms of those historical figures found worthy of commemoration. The emphasis on local history and the accentuation of the historical, cultural and religious at the expense of the national as determinants of heritage and identity was a strategy rather than a definitive interpretation. The susceptibility of certain names to political mythologization was almost unavoidable. The notion of Saladin as belonging to the local history of Jerusalem was a legitimate option. Yet what practically mattered was that in Arab-Muslim mythology, as it emerged in the 1920s, Saladin was conceived as a national hero by virtue of his being the 'Liberator of Jerusalem'. As such, his political significance in Arab-Muslim consciousness transcended any attempts to associate him with Byzantine Emperors, crusader kings, Mamluk rulers and Turkish Sultans who represented the history of Jerusalem as a dynamic succession of rulers and regimes.

The colonial aspect of the naming procedure was clearly manifest also in the commemoration of contemporary Imperial history. Naming a major thoroughfare after King George V was a token of respect to the British king after his death in 1936. In addition to Jerusalem, the name appeared on the street signs of Arab Jaffa, Jewish Tel Aviv and Haifa. Storrs Avenue and Wauchope Street commemorated the first British governor of Jerusalem and the British High Commissioner, respectively.

Towards the end of British rule in Jerusalem the street names of the city represented both

vernacular traditions and commemorative gestures promoted by interested agencies (Figure 1). The former names were mainly present in the Old City. The latter, mainly in the New City, were divided into two main categories. One included street names that appeared in Jewish neighborhoods and integrated Jewish historical themes into the geography of the city. Zionist nuances were muted. Whereas Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, "The renewer of Hebrew speech" was commemorated by the name of a central thoroughfare, the founding father of modern Zionism, Herzl, was not officially commemorated in Jerusalem's city-map, although his commemoration figured prominently in Jewish towns and neighborhoods elsewhere. The absence of this particular name in the cityscape of British mandate Jerusalem was a statement in its own right about the special status of the city in the realm. The other category included names accorded by the British Government to areas in the center of the city and in non-Jewish neighborhoods. Notwithstanding the participation of representatives of the main communities of Jerusalem in an advisory capacity, the names proposed and chosen represented the British point of view regarding what were appropriate commemorations.

The confluence of different visions of communal history and the need to accommodate these different visions in the framework of one and the same city resulted in a commemorative mosaic that reflected the fractured history of Jerusalem and the communal contexture of its population. At the end of the British mandate the street names of Jerusalem conflated ancient and contemporary history and different historical traditions. R. M. Graves commented on this:²⁶

Apart from the Jaffa Road, the Betlehem Road and the Nablus Road, which indicate directions, we have Julian's Way, King George Avenue, Princess Mary Avenue, David Street, Abyssinian Street, the Street of the Prophets, St. Louis' Way, Suleiman Street, St. Paul's Road, Ben Yehuda Street, Mamilla Road and Agrippa's Way, together with other secondary streets such as Wauchope Street and Storrs Avenue.

Conclusions

As a commemorative medium, street names suggest more than spatial orientation. They also offer historical orientation, a 'map of history' of sorts, as well as an official version of historical heritage reflecting notions prevalent among the authorities in charge of the naming of streets.

The case of street names either introduced or proposed for Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem prior to 1948 represents a colonial rather than a nationalist pattern of street-naming. It appears that the British authorities who were actively involved in regulating the street names of Jerusalem, were intent upon reducing nationalist undertones. The preference was for names that commemorated the history of Jerusalem and its status as a holy city to Jews, Christians and Muslims. With the history of Jerusalem being the primary organizing principle (though not the sole criterion for selecting historical names), the historical connotation on street signs was to a substantial extent articulated in local terms of the city's long and turbulent history.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the British administration, the growing political tensions in Jerusalem in the last years of British Mandate rendered the continuation of efforts to name



Figure 1: Jerusalem Index Plan. Source: Kendall, H. 1948: *Jerusalem: The City Plan*, London: His Majesty's stationary office.

streets practically impossible. In his memoirs R. M. Graves admitted: "it was found impossible, for political reasons, to reconvene the latest Committee, and until better times come the problem of street-naming must remain unsolved". However, in the aftermath of the 1948 war the political and demographic conditions prevailing in Jerusalem changed dramatically, and the renaming of streets in former Arab neighborhoods in western Jerusalem belonged to the transformation of this part of the city into the capital of the newly established State of Israel.

Notes

1. Y. Bar Gal, "Names for the Streets of Tel Aviv: A Chapter in Cultural-Urban History (1909-1934)," *Cathedra* 47 (1987): 118-131 (Hebrew.)
2. See: Letter, deputy district governor to the Mayor of Tel Aviv, January 28, 1925: Letter, deputy district governor to the Mayor of Jaffa, February 6, 1925 (Tel Aviv: Municipal Archive 3/76).
3. K. Palonen, "Reading Street Names Politically", in *Reading the Political. Exploring the Margins of Politics*, eds K. Palonen and T. Parvikko (The Finnish Political Science Association, Tampere 1993) pp. 103-121
4. M. Azaryahu, 1996, "The Power of Commemorative Street Names", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14: 311-330.
5. R. M. Graves, *Experiment in Anarchy* (London 1949), p. 39
6. Graves, *Experiment in Anarchy*, p. 39
7. See the overview by Graves, *Experiment in Anarchy*, pp. 29-30
8. In 1938 the Christian representative was Anastas Hanania, and the two Muslim representatives were Saad El Din El Khalili and Hassan Sudki El Dajani. Dajani (1898-1938) was politically affiliated with the Nashashibi clan and in opposition to the El Husseini leadership. He was murdered in 1938. In 1940 the chairman of the SNC was Yakub Farradj (1874-1944), leader of the Greek-Orthodox community of Jerusalem, who supported the British and served for many years as deputy mayor of Jerusalem.
9. Report on Naming of Streets, Mayor of Jerusalem to the District Commissioner, July 19, 1938, Jerusalem City Archive (hence: JCA) 833/ A 18-6).
10. Report on the meeting of the SNC, January 1, 1940.
11. Letter, Mayor of Jerusalem to District Commissioner, May 9, 1939, JCA 833/A 18-6
12. Decisions taken by the council at their 180th meeting held on December 23, 1940, item 1212: reports of the meeting of the street naming committee held on October 8, 1940. JCA.
13. Decision taken by the council at their 180th meeting held at the city offices on December 23, 1940
14. Report of meeting of the SNC, October 18, 1940, JCA
15. These were Dr. Eugene Weber and Sheikh Dia Ed Din El Khatib, the commissioner of Muslim

courts. Mr. Baramki represented the Department of Antiquity. In their status as "advisory members" see: Minutes of a meeting of the SNC, October 11, 1945

16. Minutes of the SNC meeting, October 11, 1945, JCA
17. Minutes of the SNC meeting, December 13, 1945, JCA
18. Minutes of the SNC meeting, January 3, 1946, JCA.
19. Minutes of the SNC meeting, March 7, 1946, JCA
20. Minutes of the SNC meeting, March 7, 1946, JCA; Minutes of the meeting of the SNC, February 7, 1946, JCA
21. Minutes of the SNC meeting, March 7, 1946, JCA
22. Minutes of the SNC meeting, February 7, 1946, JCA
23. Minutes of the SNC meeting, January 3, 1946, JCA
24. Minutes of the SNC meeting, February 7, 1946, JCA
25. Memorandum, October 2, 1945, JCA
26. Graves, *Experiment in Anarchy*, p. 39