

# Palestinian Museum highlights Jerusalem's isolation

Jerusalem Lives, the inaugural exhibition at the Birzeit museum, mixes traditional and contemporary art.

[Nigel Wilson](#) 27 Aug 2017

**Birzeit, Occupied West Bank** - Outside the white-walled facade of the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, a cacophony of sharp, demanding voices disturbed the quiet.

"Ramallah! Ramallah! Ramallah!" cried one voice. Others followed, booming from the loudspeakers placed across the museum car park, enticing potential travellers to destinations including [Gaza](#), Beirut and Damascus.

The sound installation, Untitled (Servees) by Emily Jacir, brought a chaotic urban scene to a sleepy hilltop in the occupied [West Bank](#) for the launch of Jerusalem Lives, the inaugural exhibition at the Palestinian Museum. The museum's formal opening was set for Sunday evening.

"Emily did this work in 2008 in Jerusalem at Damascus Gate," said Reem Fadda, curator of Jerusalem Lives. "She asked the taxi drivers to recreate the emotion that was there when they used to take travellers all across the cities of Palestine, from Lyd to Ramle to Ramallah and across the borders into Arab cities. They used to go to Damascus, Beirut and it was all connected."



Photographs by Ahed Izhiman are displayed in the first room of the exhibition, surrounded by images, sculptures and souvenirs depicting the Dome of the Rock [Nigel Wilson/Al Jazeera]

Jacir's sound work establishes one of the key themes in *Jerusalem Lives*: that the city has lost connectivity and become increasingly isolated from the rest of the world since it was occupied by [Israel](#) in 1967.

Fadda's politically charged exhibition aims to animate [Jerusalem](#) for Palestinians throughout the occupied West Bank who are prevented from visiting the city, as well as international visitors.

Using a mix of traditional artworks alongside contemporary audio, visual and sculptural pieces, *Jerusalem Lives* examines the reasons behind the disconnect through a variety of lenses.

"We are told to look at a city from its cultural, economic, political, ideological and environmental perspectives," Fadda said. "That's the methodology that I used to look at the city and examine how this globalisation, this universalist phenomenon, has failed."



Vera Tamari's installation Home recalls the stairwells that once connected Palestinian homes throughout the Old City of Jerusalem, today caged for 'security' reasons by Israeli settlers [Nigel Wilson/Al Jazeera]

Over the past nine months, Fadda and her team have worked to unite artworks by 48 Palestinian, Arab and international artists to illuminate these themes.

Inside the museum, the exhibition begins with a colourful display that explores the representation of Jerusalem in popular culture and the [media](#). Scale models of the Dome of the Rock are placed in front of screens depicting news footage of conflict in Jerusalem, and the imagery continues in a series of posters archived by the Palestinian Poster Project.

The following rooms zig-zag between artworks and interactive educational installations.

Spread over one area of the exhibition's floor, Lebanese-born Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's Present Tense presents a map of Oslo-era [Palestine](#), outlined on a grid of Nablus olive oil soap. Nearby, visitors enter a small room and find themselves encircled by a four-wall panoramic



photograph of the Israeli settlements that surround Jerusalem, created by photographer Ahed Izhiman.



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme recreated four looted Neolithic masks, with sound illuminating connections between the masks and destroyed Palestinian villages [Nigel Wilson/Al Jazeera]

Infographics, interactive displays and maps fill the spaces between the main rooms, illuminating aspects of Palestinian life in Jerusalem under Israeli occupation, including the range of identity cards and their respective restrictions, data on land control and construction in the city and maps showing various obstacles to freedom of movement.



Iraqi/Dutch artist Athar Jabar created Stone - Opus 15, a Palestinian stone installation that explores the importance of stone in the religious and everyday landscape of Jerusalem [Nigel Wilson/Al Jazeera]

Fadda told Al Jazeera that for young Palestinians, especially those who are not able to enter Jerusalem, there is a knowledge gap regarding Palestinian life in the city, which she aims to partially bridge.

"How do we decolonise our minds?" she said. "For me, these are the means. This is how you do it. You bring this wealth of culture and knowledge-making, put it together, and you start to think together, how do we strategise ways of getting out of this?"

In the museum's sloping, terraced garden, where 18 specially commissioned sculptures are displayed, Athar Jaber described the process of creating Stone - Opus 15. The two-metre-high plinth invites viewers to interact with the piece by touching it, writing on it, and sitting in its central niche.

The Rome-born sculptor was inspired by time spent in Jerusalem observing how people interacted with stones, from the sacred stones at the city's holy sites to the stone walls and streets.

"A contrast that I saw is that when you leave the religious sites, you have the same stones that make up the city, the streets, the houses, but it's completely violated and disregarded," Jaber said. "It is a big contrast in how to deal with the stone, so I tried to condense that information into one stone."



Various images of al-Haram al-Sharif and the Dome of the Rock line the hallway outside the Jerusalem Lives exhibition [Nigel Wilson/Al Jazeera]

The Palestinian Museum first opened its doors in May 2016, although visitors have had to wait 15 months for the first exhibition, set to open to the public on August 27. Despite the delay, which followed personnel changes among senior staff at the museum, there remains hope within the Palestinian art community that the museum can represent and elevate Palestinian art to new levels of recognition internationally.

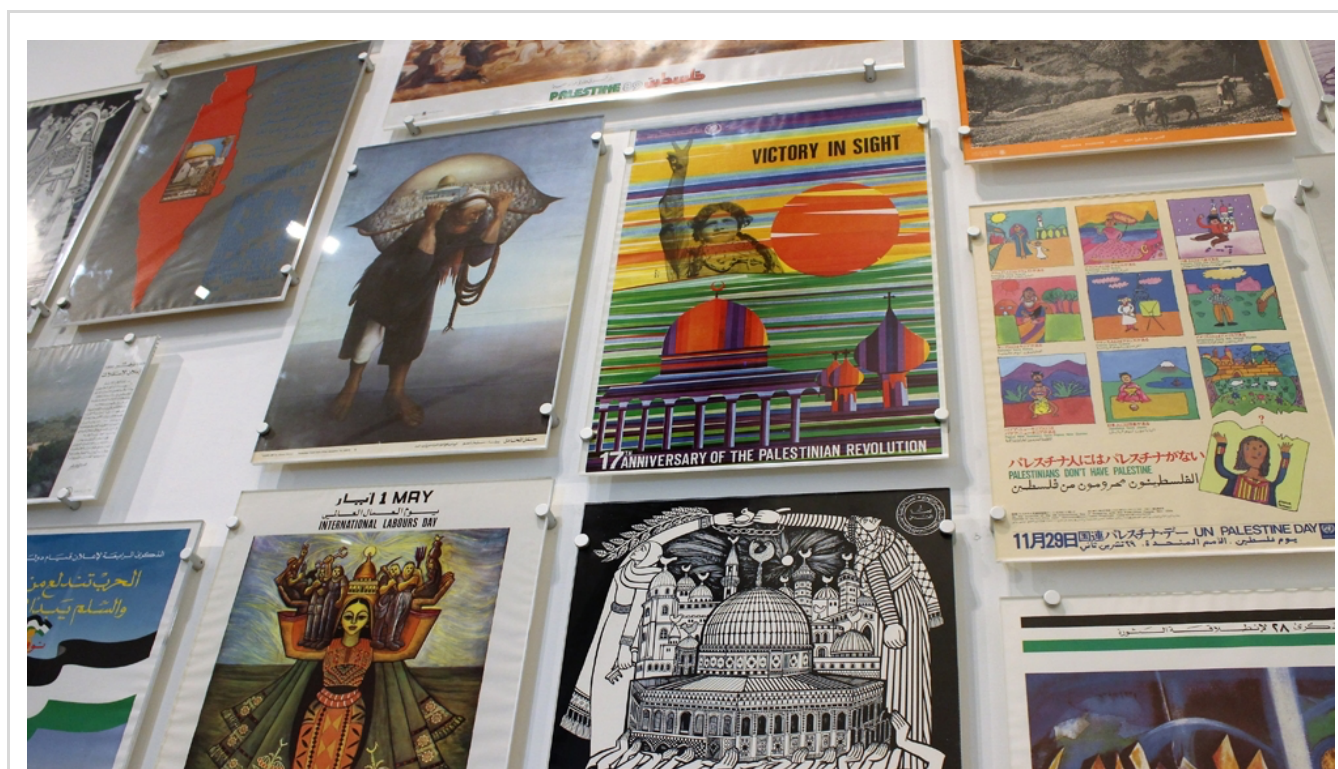
"We have many museums in Palestine," said George al-Ama, an art researcher and collector based in Bethlehem. "But the scale, the complexity, the quality, the team, the dream and the vision of this museum, I think it's the biggest. We have a deep need, a crucial need to have a museum, a body, to take care, to exhibit, to document and to spread knowledge about our material culture."

In addition to the physical exhibition, Jerusalem Lives will involve a public educational programme and a two-volume catalogue, produced in conjunction with the Jerusalem Quarterly journal. Also titled Jerusalem Lives, the catalogue will include essays that focus on the lives of



Jerusalemites who have made an effect on the city in the last 100 years.

"It's meant to exhibit the variety of people who lived in Jerusalem," said Salim Tamari, director of the Institute for Jerusalem Studies. "Many of them, in their diaries or in the biographical work that was written about them, show various features of the religious communities, neighbourhoods and the modernity of the city."



A selection of posters from the Palestinian Poster Project are arranged on one wall of the exhibition [Nigel Wilson/Al Jazeera]