

Meeting Israelis for the First Time, Palestinians Ask: How Do You Feel Living in Our Homes?

Conversations with Palestinians who can never go home again, forays to deserted tourist sites in Amman and a visit to a refugee camp. A quick trip to Jordan

[Gideon Levy](#) Feb 03, 2018 2:36 AM



The Al-Baq'a refugee camp in Jordan. Catrin Ormestad

AMMAN – In her spacious apartment in the western part of this city, artist Tamam al-Akhal longs for her home in the Old City of Jaffa. The widow of the unofficial Palestinian national painter Ismail Shammout, she has turned her home into a shrine in his memory. Paintings by both artists adorn every wall and are also stacked up in her atelier, in one of the

rooms of the house. Most of the works depict the [Nakba](#) and the [occupation](#), realistic pictures of deeply engaged national art, bold and jolting.

A maid serves hot sachlav, and in minutes, Akhal is talking about the house in Jaffa, which she was forced to leave in 1948 with her parents, via a rickety boat to Beirut, and to which she was not allowed to return. She was 12 at the time. Her whole life and work since then have played out under the shadow of that trauma. A stranger will not be able to comprehend this. An Israeli won't accept it, and will almost certainly not show compassion, sympathy, responsibility or guilt.

Living in Jordan and longing for Zion; in the East while her heart is in the West. Akhal will not forget nor forgive the Israeli artist who, in 1997, refused to allow her to enter the house that had once been her family's home, and had subsequently become the Israeli's. Akhal later painted the artist, who has since passed away, as two ugly figures shutting the gate to the house from the outside and the inside, locking it against the uninvited guest whose home it had once been. The irony of fate: The home of the girl who became an artist was the home of another artist from a different people.

A few years later, however, Dr. Yazid Shammout, the son of Akhal and Shammout, succeeded in visiting the house in Jaffa's artists' quarter. A highly successful businessman, he lives in Hanover, Germany, and, in conjunction with a Kuwait-based investment company, runs a network of assisted-living facilities in northern Germany, which employs around 1,000 Germans.

The day after my visit with Akhal, I returned to her home for an evening with her friends from the elderly Palestinian elite here, among them a successful psychiatrist, a wealthy businessman from Brazil and a few dentists. They, too, spoke only about Palestine, past and present. Their hearts are still there; some of them are regular readers of Haaretz in

English. People from Gaza huddled with others from Gaza, and the Hebronites did the same, as though decades hadn't passed – an echo of our Jewish Landsmannschaften during Israel's early years.

S., a refugee from Nablus who owns a PR agency in Amman, was quite beside himself. He'd never met an Israeli in his life. His wife, who works as a volunteer in the Gaza Refugee Camp in Jerash, had declined to come this evening. It was too much for her, S. explained. "What will I tell people in the camp?" she had said to him. "That I ate an excellent meal with an Israeli while in the camp people are hungry for bread?"

It was a highly emotional evening.

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"How do you feel living in Israel, on our land and in our homes?" S. asked, deeply agitated. I told him about my father, who was tossed about on the high seas in 1939 and was transferred to a detention camp in Beirut, and no gate was opened to him as he fled for his life, other than illegal immigration to Palestine. But S. was not placated. I empathized.



Artist Tamam al-Akhal with painting of her Jaffa home. Catrin Ormestad

Some of the people in Akhal's home are not allowed to visit their

homeland. But there was the daughter of Palestinian refugees who, for a very large fee, is being treated at Hadassah Medical Center in Ein Karem, Jerusalem, for cancer; she visits every few weeks and is very grateful to her physicians. There were some on hand whose dignity does not allow them to request the Israeli tourist visa that would enable them to visit their native villages and homes, and others who have come to terms with their fate and have embarked on a full new life here, some of them becoming very wealthy.

Tamam al-Akhal and Ismail Shammout met in Cairo. Yasser Arafat, Abu Jihad and Abu Iyad attended their wedding; Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet, became their intimate friend. Since her husband died, in 2006, Akhal has written him a letter every day, telling him what's happening in her life. Every few weeks she visits his grave. He was a refugee from Lod, the city of George Habash, in which dozens were massacred.

The short flight to Amman brings to mind buried memories. Captain Osama al-Hai, issues instructions to the passengers in Arabic. An Arab captain is flying Israelis to an Arab country on a Royal Jordanian plane – all the years that have passed haven't dulled the experience.

On the flight is a young settler from Alon and his friend from Givat Shmuel, both wearing small skullcaps. They are on the way to surf in Sri Lanka, with a stopover in Doha, Qatar. On the way they speak to another Israeli backpacker, and the first question is, of course: Where did you serve – i.e., in the army? When they land in Amman, they'll replace the skullcaps with baseball caps.

On the margins of all the upheaval in the region an alternative reality exists of flights to the East via Qatar, because tickets are cheaper. In the passport control line in front of me is a Syrian, behind me an Iraqi. In Europe the border control officers ask more questions than are put to the holder of an Israeli passport at Queen Alia International Airport in Amman.

The whole pleasant stay in Amman kept reminding me that this is how it could be, this is how it should have been, this is how we thought it would be, in the intoxicating 1990s.

But real life quickly intrudes: only three small suitcases are on the baggage carousel of the Airbus A320, which was quite full. Almost everyone seems to be in transit; no one is staying in Amman. Too bad, because in contrast to previous visits, this time it turned out to be a fascinating, welcoming city. The mansaf in Al-Bawad Restaurant was superb.

Jordan is a country of shelter. No other country in the region has taken in as many refugees over the years as the Hashemite Kingdom. After every war, and sometimes beforehand, too, everyone fled to Jordan, which almost never shut its gates. About a third of the country's inhabitants are refugees. There are 670,000 Syrians in the refugee camps along the border, prisoners for years, but at least in a safe place. Another two million Syrians live here and have raised families. Iraqi, Libyan and now also Yemenite refugees stream into the country.

Jordan is a light unto the nations far more than its neighbor to the west, at least when it comes to opening its gates to refugees.

The feeling in the streets is of relaxed stability. There are few soldiers or policemen. Amman, a city of four million people by day and two million at night, where the traffic is constantly backed up, is also probably the only city in the Middle East where horns don't blare. In this, too, it differs from its loud neighbor to the west, Tel Aviv. Even the main, bustling shopping avenue, King Faisal Street, is relatively quiet in comparison to Cairo, Ramallah or Tel Aviv.

A small newspaper kiosk in the center of the street, the Arab Culture Stand, is considered the best bookstore in town. "There's no book that Abu Ali won't be able to find for you," I was told. We asked for "The Little

Prince." In English or in Arabic, he wanted to know. He made a phone call, and within a few minutes, an Arabic edition of the book was in our hands. Price: 4 dinars, about 22 shekels (\$6.50). A glass of pomegranate juice costs 1 dinar.

There are hardly any Western tourists in the streets. Next to the entrance to the Al-Husseini Mosque is a poster put up by Amman's Chamber of Commerce, protesting the U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The 56th birthday of King Abdullah was celebrated here on Tuesday; a few avowed monarchists decorated their windows with his photos and their congratulations.



The Al-Baqa'a refugee camp in Jordan. Catrin Ormestad

There are no tourists in the ancient Roman amphitheater, only a few local kids playing soccer. The city's fortress, which offers a spectacular view, is

also pretty empty.

The taxi driver from Irbid whom we hired for the day told us he'd been an authorized tour guide. But when the tourists stopped coming to Jordan – because of what's happening in the region, he says – he had to find a different occupation. At heart, though, he is still a guide: He screened a clip about every place we went on his cellphone, including the Al-Baqa'a refugee camp, which we visited Tuesday afternoon.

The camp, which started out in 1967 with 5,000 tents for 26,000 refugees from Karameh and elsewhere, is today a shameful slum of about 120,000 people, a favela on the outskirts of Amman, half an hour's drive from the glittering new Abdali Mall. The largest of the Palestinian camps in Jordan, which has five other similar facilities, Al-Baqa'a is considered the best of them, relatively speaking. The Gaza Camp, adjacent to the city of Jerash, is the worst. Al-Baqa'a is about 20 kilometers northwest of the center of Amman. It is a dense maze of structures, almost as crammed as the camps in the Gaza Strip itself, and situated in the heart of a valley surrounded by farming areas.

A sign at the entrance to the camp's main street declares that February 1 is "Free Medical Care Day." It's donations to this camp and others like it that Donald Trump now wants to slash. Even for one who is used to refugee camps, this one is painful to see. Meager stores and booths, numberless children in the streets, narrow alleys, anarchic construction, a wilderness of electric cables and telephone lines. Trucks unload cheap toys from China. Some young people invite me into their store, "T'fadlu, please, come in." But their shop is still under construction.

"Take a picture, take a picture," the proprietor of a bread stall shouts. "Take a picture of the white gold." The price of bread shot up 60 percent this week, and the expectation was for riots to break out. "Jerusalem, the red line," reads a sign on a cigarette-and-coffee kiosk, referring to Trump's decision to move the U.S. Embassy there.

I was here at this camp at the end of November, 1999, and at the time I wrote, "Hope has died and despair is final and absolute." This week it seemed to me that the conditions in Al-Baqa'a have only deteriorated in the almost 20 years since then, and the overcrowding is worse still. "The harder the present, the more these people cling to the past and glorify it," I wrote back then.

Nothing has changed since then, certainly not for the better.