



# Of hope and resistance in Balata

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Between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River Valley, in Palestine, there are some of the oldest cities in the world—Jericho and Nablus. The latter was Abraham’s first stop on the Holy Land, and where God promised these lands to him and his descendants. Like the name of the nation, that of Nablus, too, changed with events: Schem, Tel Balata or Flavia Neapolis are all names of the same valley between the Ebal and Gerizim mountains, which grew as thousands of refugees fled from the occupation of their territory in 1948.

On May 15, 1948, the State of Israel declared its independence —known in Palestine as *Nakba*, catastrophe—leading to around 700,000 people becoming refugees between 1946 and 1948 (the number of refugees today numbers around five million). Many of these refugees sheltered in temporary tents that slowly changed into small cement houses—those who were expelled from their homes still kept their keys, and even, hope.

The hope is that the name of Palestine returns to being the name a free country, as it was in the days of Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BC, and as witnessed by later historians. This hope is guarded in those keys, symbolising the

doors to freedom. Only those centuries in which imperialist dynasties rested, supported by biblical orientalism, has the name changed. However, the coastal cities of the current state of Israel serve as a radiography of these lights tattooed on the keys that the refugees have, such as Ibrahim Abdullah Jamal, who lives in the largest camp in the West Bank—Balata.

Balata, with thousands of houses agglomerated in an area of only 0.25 square kilometres, is also an archaeological zone. Among the ruins of what is believed to be the first settlement of the city of Nablus are the old temple complex and the walls of the city. These surround Jacob’s Well, where the Gospel of John places

Although there is no reliable information confirming, Jews believe that Joseph, one of the 12 children of Jacob, is buried there and therefore consider it a sacred tomb. With the military and political help of the State of Israel, the place is now recognised as their own. In 1967, the Jewish state took the West Bank and the tomb became a place of worship only for Jews. Muslims were prohibited from entering, although it is believed by some to also be the tomb of an 18th century local sheikh. In spite of the Oslo Accords of 1993, which stated that the tomb fell under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority, the Israel Defense Forces guard the site and prevent the entrance of Muslims. This has led to several conflicts, especially since the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000. Currently, the enclave is an island in the archipelago of Jewish territories that fill the West Bank.

In the West Bank settlements (of which there are more than 200, with more than 700,000 inhabitants), Palestinian villages and towns sprout among 19 sheltered refugee camps (with a population of more than 800,000). All of these are known for being bastions of the Palestinian resistance—a resistance that is reflected in the numerous cultural centers that work there, promoting riots of peace and tranquillity in the middle of conflicts. This is precisely what one in Balata, the Yafa Cultural Center, is trying to do.

The Yafa Cultural Center is named after one of the coastal cities in historical Palestine, Yafa (beautiful), as it was called by the first Canaanite settlers. Zionist forces expelled most of its 70,000 inhabitants on May 13, 1948, forcing them to flee by sea to Gaza or Beirut, or to inner cities such as Ramla and Lod (which also ended up being occupied) or Jerusalem. A large part of the newspapers and books published in Palestine were printed in Yafa, where there was a widely developed industry, and also from where citrus fruits were exported across the world. Yafa lost its people with *Nakba* and the military occupation, even though the



Graffiti in the entrance of Balata

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Jesus Christ resting while talking to a Samaritan woman and where the book of Genesis describes a land that Jacob bought to build on, and Joseph’s tomb.

Joseph’s tomb, revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews, as well as by Samaritans, is a point of further friction in the religious history of the place.

UN partition plan had not assigned the city to the Jewish state. Thus, as it became part of its government and after the passing of the Absentees’ Property Law, the industries and its cultural fabric were lost, scattered over the lands their settlers had to roam around.

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