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Jessica Marglin on Vincent Lemire, *In the Shadow of the Wall*

Those of us who teach and write on modern Jewish history have undoubtedly read about the euphoria of the Jewish soldiers who, on June 7, 1967, unexpectedly entered Jerusalem's Old City. After just two days of war, Israeli Jews found themselves at sites they had not been allowed to visit for nearly twenty years: they climbed up to the Temple Mount (Haram al-Sharif in Arabic) and visited the Western Wall (ha-Kotel ha-Ma'aravi in Hebrew, al-Buraq in Arabic) for the first time since Jerusalem became a divided city in 1948. Iconic photographs taken at the time show soldiers gazing up (at the urging of photographers) in front of the *kotel*, or jubilant outside the Dome of the Rock, as they visited holy places that held intense resonance even for the most secular among them.

What should also be familiar to modern Jewish historians is the significant gap in the experience of Jews and Palestinians in Israel/Palestine since the beginning of the Zionist movement. What for most Israelis remains the War of Independence, Palestinians call the Nakba, or “catastrophe.” Similarly, Israeli Jews and Palestinians encountered the news of the Six-Day War quite differently. Israeli Jews and their coreligionists across the world had feared Israel’s imminent destruction in the months leading up to the war; the swift and decisive victory that played out surprised and mostly delighted supporters of Israel. By contrast, Palestinians dubbed the war al-Naksa, “the setback,” a deliberate echo of Nakba.

The events of the night of Saturday, June 10, 1967, in the neighborhood adjoining the Western Wall might seem relatively minor given the enormity of events elsewhere during the still-ongoing war. Yet for the inhabitants of the Maghrebi Quarter, as this neighborhood was known, it was devastating in the most brutal of ways. Just as Shabbat ended, bulldozers converged on the Maghrebi Quarter, a residential neighborhood home to many Muslims of North African descent. An army regiment began shouting orders to the
residents to evacuate their houses immediately. In his superb book on this neighborhood of Jerusalem, Vincent Lemire records excerpts from interviews he conducted with some of the people who experienced this expulsion firsthand. These testimonies capture the fear experienced by the neighborhood’s inhabitants. Moussa-Issa Ben-Abdallah Ahmed al-Moghrabi, known as Abu Mahdi, was thirteen in 1967. He recalls the events vividly:

When the Israeli soldiers entered the neighborhood, we were all gathered in the house; we were looking out the window, we could hear the sound of doors being broken down, the shouts of soldiers, then we heard the loudspeakers ordering us to leave immediately, and not to bring anything with us. We left on foot…. I was holding my father’s hand, he was weeping. (p. 205)

The bulldozers were making way for what is today the Western Wall Plaza (Rehavat ha-Kotel ha-Ma’aravi in Hebrew). Between the afternoon of June 9 and the evening of June 10, military and government officials—including Teddy Kollek, the mayor of Jerusalem; Uzi Narkiss, commander of the Israeli Defense Forces in the central region during the war; and officials from the Foreign Ministry and the National Park Authority—all signed off on a plan to quickly and discreetly demolish the Maghrebi Quarter in order to create a large public space in front of the Western Wall. Nor did this plan come out of the blue: as early as the first decades of the twentieth century, various Zionists proposed the destruction of the houses in front of the kotel in order to create a space to accommodate Jewish gatherings.

All good history should enable us to see the past differently, which in turn affects the way we see the present. Testimonies like that of Abu Mahdi should be striking enough to alter some readers’ perceptions of the Six-Day War. More broadly, there is little question that Vincent Lemire’s book changes our understanding of the city of Jerusalem. In the Shadow of the Wall offers a microhistory of a now-extinct neighborhood whose origins stretch back to the twelfth century. Lemire’s painstaking account of the destruction of the neighborhood—which Israeli officials and the media deliberately portrayed as spontaneous—is just one example of how beautifully this book uncovers previously hidden layers of Jerusalem’s history. Lemire’s training in urban history gives him the tools to bring this small piece of the earth fully alive. His impressive linguistic and archival range—he draws on sources in Hebrew, Arabic, Ottoman, French, and English (and I might have missed a few languages), from archives in Israel, Palestine, Turkey, France, Algeria, Morocco, and Switzerland—allows him to write a transnational and transimperial history of the Maghrebi Quarter, and by extension of Jerusalem. Before reading Lemire’s book, I had known about the destruction of the Maghrebi Quarter during the war; I read it primarily to learn more about this event. The book I encountered far exceeded my expectations, offering that which the best of microhistories have to offer: the granularity of a well-defined object of study alongside the broader reverberations of the subject—in this case not only the history of Jerusalem, but a global understanding of Israel/Palestine more broadly.

In the Shadow of the Wall begins with the emergence of this neighborhood in the medieval period. The Maghrebi Quarter originally became associated with North Africa in 1187, when Salah al-Din, the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty who was responsible for the reconquest of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, set aside the district for pilgrims from what are today Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. His son, al-Afdal Ali, created the neighborhood’s first waqf (pious endowment) in 1193. In 1320, a descendant of the celebrated Sufi mystic Sidi Abu Madyan (d. 1197) established a larger waqf that set aside a number of buildings just south of al-Buraq for the use of North African pilgrims and attached agricultural land nearby in order to provide an income that would be used to feed, house, and care for these pilgrims. The Waqf Abu Madyan became synonymous with the
Maghrebi Quarter and remained the center of the North African community in Jerusalem. Lemire’s study of the North African Muslims who had been a part of Jerusalem’s urban fabric since the time of the Crusades suggests interesting parallels with Jews from the same region who flocked to Jerusalem and the other three holy cities of Palestine. As a major spiritual center, Jerusalem was a node connecting Jews, Muslims, and of course Christians across the globe.

In the nineteenth century, French colonization of Algeria (1830), Tunisia (1881), and Morocco (1912) transformed the geopolitics of the Maghrebi Quarter, and thus of Jerusalem. As the ruling power in North Africa, French consular officials in Jerusalem became aware of the potential for claiming authority over North Africans and North African institutions in the city. It was not until the end of the Ottoman Empire that France began to assert this prerogative. Under the British Mandate, the inhabitants of the Maghrebi Quarter began to see the French Empire as a possible counterweight to the British governing power. French officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also began to see the Waqf Abu Madyan as rightfully under French jurisdiction. France became actively involved in the running of the waqf and even asked the colonial governments of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia to contribute to its upkeep. This small corner of Jerusalem proved the confluence of French, British, Zionist, and Palestinian interests, and Lemire offers a rich and textured account that brings together the daily lives of the quarter’s inhabitants with the official opinions emitted in Paris, Algiers, Tunis, and Rabat.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the division of Jerusalem was disastrous for the Maghrebi Quarter as it cut the heart of the waqf off from the agricultural properties that had financed it for centuries. Most of the Waqf Abu Madyan was in Jordan, but much of the land belonging to it was now in Ein Karem, in West Jerusalem. Needless to say, the revenues from the land in Ein Karem no longer went to the upkeep of the buildings in the Old City or to feeding their inhabitants. With decolonization came another shift: not only were the newly independent states of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria unable (and perhaps also unwilling) to spare money to support the Waqf Abu Madyan, but the waqf’s association with France became a cause for political opposition. Although many of the North Africans living in the Maghrebi Quarter had previously embraced a claim to French protection, Algerian nationalists fighting a long war for independence now depicted France as the enemy of all North Africans. In propaganda aimed at Jerusalem’s small community of North Africans, the Front de Libération Nationale equated French protection to a “deadly germ” (p. 159).

In the Shadow of the Wall left me with questions beyond the scope of the project that future research can address. The history of North African Muslims in Palestine appears to be less well documented than that of North African Jews in Eretz Yisrael (though that subject is hardly exhausted). I wondered to what extent the many Jews who made their way from North Africa to Jerusalem encountered their countrymen, who would have spoken similar dialects of Arabic and otherwise shared many cultural, culinary, and political traits. For instance, Jews and Muslims from Algeria who came to cities like Smyrna (present-day Izmir) were, until 1830, grouped under the authority of a wakil (representative) from the Ottoman province of Algiers. Did this kind of institution exist in Jerusalem—and if so, did it offer some kind of common political or even legal belonging to North Africans in Palestine?

The overwhelming sentiment I was left with upon finishing In the Shadow of the Wall was gratitude to Lemire for having undertaken the kind of intensive historical research that makes us see old topics with new eyes. If the city of Jerusalem is one of the most studied parts of the world, Lemire proves that the subject is hardly exhausted.
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