

A Micro-History of the Holy City

by Myriam Ababsa

The plaza in front of the Western Wall in Jerusalem was the scene of intense conflict between Jews and Muslims in the twentieth century. Paying unique attention to the faintest traces, historian Vincent Lemire traces the successive episodes of violence and destruction that unfolded at the foot of the wall.

About: Vincent Lemire, *In the Shadow of the Wall: The Life and Death of Jerusalem's Maghrebi Quarter, 1187-1967*, translated by Jane Kuntz, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2023. 400 p.

Despite being the omphalos of the Western world, the focal point of maps and prayers for two thousand years, the city of Jerusalem has received relatively little attention from urban historians. In light of this observation, Vincent Lemire, historian and director of the French Research Center in Jerusalem, has been working on a sizeable task since 2014: He has been leading a team of twelve researchers responsible for making available archival documents on the Ottoman and contemporary history of the city.¹ The fruit of this collective effort is *In the Shadow of the Wall*, a micro-history of Jerusalem's Maghrebi Quarter which is all the more fascinating in that it is constructed as an investigation. Inspired by his master Patrick Boucheron, Lemire skillfully applies his historical method, which consists of starting from a significant

¹ The Open Jerusalem project, which brings together a dozen researchers working in twelve languages and in partnership with 80 conservation institutions around the world, has published in open access 39,000 original documents describing urban life and municipal management in the Holy City from 1840 to 1940.

event and the “auras” of historical actors to find “traces” in memories and archives.² He guides us step by step through the stages of his research and into the materiality of alleyways and remains.

The book begins with the earthquake of February 17, 2004, whose epicenter was in Jericho and whose effects were felt as far away as Amman. The quake caused the collapse of the ramp leading to the Western Wall, revealing the rubble-filled vaults of the Maghrebi Quarter which had been razed to the ground in a single night on June 10, 1967. In the Holy City, Lemire writes, “a land slippage is nearly always accompanied by a time slippage.” Archaeological excavations were then initiated below the esplanade and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, fueling tensions against the backdrop of Israel’s colonization of East Jerusalem. Lemire asks a series of questions about this neighborhood, which has been little studied despite its strategic location at the foot of the Western Wall: What was its history? Who were its inhabitants? What was its legal status and how did it fit into the urban fabric? And who took the decision to destroy it?

Drawing on original Arab, Ottoman, French, and Israeli sources, Lemire recounts the history of the construction of Jerusalem’s Maghrebi Quarter by Saladin in 1187, its peaceful expansion until the turn of the sixteenth century, its impoverishment after its lands were confiscated by Israel in 1948, and its planned destruction at the end of the Six-Day War. He contextualizes the social practices of residents within close-knit spaces, highlighting the peaceful cohabitation of the various communities that resided in the neighborhood until the end of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Europe, the need arose to ensure access to the wall and to redesign the streets of the neighborhood, as the spaces available for Jewish worshippers were only three meters wide. Room had to be made for worship in the context of the rise of Zionism. Lemire describes how Jewish and Muslim religious holidays were politically instrumentalized to defend these disputed spaces. The originality of his work lies in the examination of France’s policy in Jerusalem, which consisted of financing the charitable activities of the Maghrebi *waqf*³ in the name of its

² Patrick Boucheron, *Trace and Aura: The Recurring Lives of St. Ambrose of Milan*, New York, Other Press, 2022. Boucheron’s book is inspired by Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press, 2002.

³ A *waqf* is a pious religious or charitable foundation that is funded by an individual or a family to serve the community in perpetuity. In order to ensure sufficient funds for the maintenance of the property, the foundation is associated with farmlands, buildings, or businesses, in accordance with a charter defining the methods for managing the (inalienable) assets. *Waqfs* can be Muslim or Christian. In the Maghreb, they are known as *habous*. See Randi Deguilhem (ed.), *Le Waqf dans l’espace islamique. Outil de pouvoir socio-politique*, Damascus, Institut Français de Damas, 1995.

colonial tutelage over the Maghreb. Ultimately, he draws on municipal archives to demonstrate that the destruction of the Maghrebi Quarter by fifteen Israeli contractors on the night of June 10, 1967 had in fact been methodically prepared by the Israeli government, with the approval of the mayor of the Israeli sector of **Jerusalem**. Beyond physical destruction, the Maghrebi Quarter suffered documentary erasure, forcing the historian to search for archives scattered across United Nations records.

The book includes 69 photographs (including original archive images) that provide the reader with support and food for thought. It also reproduces interviews conducted with witnesses and key actors in the history of the Maghrebi Quarter. The reader is guided along the Western Wall plaza and taken back in time to the heart of the neighborhood thanks to the numerous photographs of Jerusalem. As the Jordanian historian and collector Hisham Khatib points out, after the invention of photography in 1839 Jerusalem became the most photographed city in the world (*Palestine and Egypt under the Ottomans: Paintings, Books, Photographs, Maps, and Manuscripts*, London, Tauris Parke Books, 2003).

At the Foot of Al-Buraq Wall and Kotel Ha-Maaravi

The Maghrebi Quarter was built to the west of the city walls by Salah ad-Din (Saladin) in 1187, **after** the reconquest of Jerusalem from the Crusaders. The area was empty at the time, as the Crusaders had decimated the Muslim and Jewish populations in 1099. Yet, the portion of the Herodian and Jebusite walls along which the construction took place was a vestige of the Second Temple destroyed by Titus in the year 70 CE. Since the seventh century, Muslims had referred to this spot as al-Buraq, in memory of the winged horse that transported Prophet Muhammad during his nighttime journey to pray “with the prophets of the ancient alliance.” It was only transformed into the “Western Wall” holy site in the sixteenth century.⁴ Prior to this, and for almost 1,500 years, the Jewish ritual of mourning the destruction of the Temple had been held on Mount Zion, south of the city, with the wall at eye level. The name “Maghrebi Quarter” is therefore ambiguous: Louis Massignon once observed that the

⁴ Rina Cohen, “Les Juifs ‘Moghrabi’ à Jérusalem (1830-1903). Les enjeux de la protection française,” *Archives juives*, 38, 2005, pp. 28-46.

Hebrew toponym “Kotel ha-Maaravi” can be translated both as “Western Wall” and as “Wall of the Maghrebis.”

In 1187, Saladin was accompanied by his eldest son, al-Afdal Ali, and by the Andalusian Sufi mystic, Sidi Abu Madyan, who had previously gone on pilgrimage to Mecca with his retinue and who had just lost a hand in the decisive Battle of Hattin against the Crusaders. To honor Maghrebis’ military participation in the reconquest of Jerusalem, Saladin built an oratory for Maghrebi pilgrims on the Haram al-Sharif, as well as a Koranic school (*madrassa*) devoted to the teaching of Maliki law (the predominant school of law in the Maghreb) and a hospice for destitute Maghrebi pilgrims to the west of the Western Wall. In 1193, al-Afdal Ali established the *Waqf* Abu Madyan, commonly known as the Maghrebi *Waqf*, which fed, clothed, sent home, and even buried thousands of pilgrims from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia over the years. As the great Andalusian Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi observed in 1206, Maghrebis enjoyed considerable prestige in Jerusalem. Maghrebi rulers donated calligraphed Qurans to the al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Merinid Moroccan sultan Abu al-Hassan Ali Abdelhaq ordered the renovation of Abu Madyan’s shrine in Tlemcen. The Maghrebi Quarter prospered throughout the Middle Ages and the Ottoman period, thanks to the income generated from the terraced lands of the village of Ein Karem. The Maghrebi community was so well integrated in Jerusalem that the steward of the *Waqf* Abu Madyan served as the head of the town criers responsible for policing markets. During a visit to the Holy City in the nineteenth century, Chateaubriand praised the Maghrebis, describing them as “porters at Jerusalem, who are sought after on account of their intelligence, and couriers esteemed for their swiftness.”⁵

Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the location of the neighborhood began to pose problems. In the sixteenth century, the Moroccan (Maaravi) Jews who had moved to Jerusalem suggested relocating worship rituals from Mount Zion to the Western Wall. However, both the Maghrebi Quarter and the road at the foot of the wall were constituted as religious assets, that is, as *waqf* in principle inalienable for all eternity. In the nineteenth century, the arrival of Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution in Central Europe increased the number of pilgrims to the Wall during religious celebrations, reinforcing the need to redevelop the area.

⁵ François-René vicomte de Chateaubriand, *Travels in Greece, Palestine, Egypt, and Barbary, during the years 1806 and 1807*, Miami, Hard Press, 2012 [1814].

Creating a Plaza for Jews

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the World Zionist Organization supported plans for the partial destruction of the Maghrebi Quarter to make room for Jewish worship. The Central Zionist Archives, created in Berlin in 1919 and moved to Jerusalem in 1933, reveal several private initiatives (including one by Edmond de Rothschild) to buy individual houses and then the entire Maghrebi Quarter for the purpose of building a plaza in front of the Western Wall. In 1912, the Syrian director of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* school in Jerusalem, Albert Antébi, tried to arouse the interest of the director of the Anglo-Palestine Company, David Levontin. He also approached Jerusalem Councilor David Yellin to purchase houses in the neighborhood that was to be destroyed. Between the fall of 1915 and the summer of 1916, as the war was raging, the directorate of the Palestinian office of the World Zionist Organization tried to negotiate with the Ottoman governor of Syria, Jamal Pasha, to buy the Maghrebi Quarter with compensation payments for local inhabitants: The objective was to build a plaza 12 meters wide by 40 meters long, a space for prayer, and a garden. However, the directorate soon realized that Jamal Pasha did not have the legitimacy to sell a *waqf* and, above all, that he was too weakened by the war. Yet, as the Palestinian historian Musa Sroor has shown (2010), some parts of Jerusalem's *waqfs* had been privatized in the nineteenth century.⁶

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Middle East was divided into British- and French-controlled mandates. The British viewed the Zionist project in a positive light. Moreover, they were hostile to the Maghrebi presence in the city because they feared it might be favorable to French interests in Palestine. One year after General Allenby's British army took Jerusalem on December 11, 1917, an urban development plan was commissioned from William McLean, who had worked on town planning in Cairo and Khartoum. McLean proposed to decongest the Old City while preserving its medieval aspect—which was sought after by pilgrims—through the creation of a series of parks and promenades around the enclosure. In November 1919, the famous town planner Patrick Geddes refined McLean's plan by proposing to build gardens that would offer views over the city. This proposal to display Jerusalem consisted of a single urban intervention in the Maghrebi Quarter, which included the removal of a row of houses adjoining the wall and the construction of a plaza planted

⁶ Around 1850, some of Ein Karem's *waqf* lands were sold to Christian religious congregations near the site of Mary's Visit to Elisabeth. Musa Sroor, *Fondations pieuses en mouvement. De la transformation du statut de propriété des biens waqfs à Jérusalem (1858-1917)*, Damas-Aix-en-Provence, IFPO-IREMAM, 2010.

with cypress trees and enclosed by a wall and gates. The aim was to create a sanctuary for Jewish worshippers. While Geddes's plaza-focused urban plan was never implemented, it did leave its mark on the imagination.

Following the Nebi Musa riots in April 1920, the mayor of Jerusalem Musa Kazim al-Husseini was brutally ousted by the British. The *Waqf* Abu Madyan had lost its two protective structures: the Ottoman Empire with its sultan-caliph, on the one hand, and the Municipality of Jerusalem, on the other. The Turkish Republic's abolition of the Caliphate in March 1923 created a vacuum in the management of the *waqfs* (*awqaf*). To this was added the cadastral reform initiated by the British in 1927, which created boundaries that endangered the lands of the *Waqf* Abu Madyan. In March 1927, the chairman of the Jewish National Council (Vaad Leumi), David Yellin, wrote that it would be difficult to acquire the "ramshackle houses in front of the Western Wall" because they belonged to the Maghrebi *waqf* managed by the Supreme Muslim Council of Palestine and its grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini. And yet, these houses were not by any means rundown; on the contrary, they were better maintained than those in other neighborhoods, thanks precisely to the income generated from the lands of Ein Karem.

On August 31, 1927, an Arab house adjoining the wall exploded. The newspaper *Al Jamia al-Arabiya*, the al-Husseini family's press organ, described the attack as a Zionist manipulation. The archives of Haganah officers show that they had effectively ordered the attack. Tensions began to rise in August 1927, culminating in the Western Wall Riots of August 1929, which left 255 people dead (133 Jews and 116 Arabs) and then spread throughout Mandate Palestine. A few years later, from 1933 to 1936, the young Yasser Arafat lived in the Maghrebi Quarter. The historian and former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, Meron Benvenisti, quotes in his memoirs a rabbi who complained at the time that "a Jew must descend from the path so that a Gentile may pass, and if the Israelite does not descend by himself, he is lowered against his will."⁷

French Protection of Muslim Holy Sites

During the British Mandate, France financed the charitable activities of the Maghrebi *waqf* in Jerusalem in the name of its colonial tutelage over the Maghreb.

⁷ Meron Benvenisti, *City of stone: The Hidden History of Jerusalem*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.

Lemire traces the lobbying efforts of Louis Massignon, professor of Muslim sociology at the Collège de France, to convince the French authorities that France had a “sacred mandate” to protect Muslim holy sites in the Maghreb and in Jerusalem and that it needed to assert itself in the eyes of the world as a “great Muslim power.” Massignon sought to persuade France to subsidize the *Waqf* Abu Madyan and to facilitate the pilgrimage of Maghrebis to Palestine. The Deir Yassin massacre on April 9, 1948, and then the capture of Ein Karem by Israel and the exodus of its population in July, then prompted him to defend the international character of Jerusalem’s holy sites of which the Maghrebi Quarter was a central element. His efforts were also aimed at countering the influence of Jordan, which decided to forbid access to the wall in 1949. Massignon succeeded in getting France to pay an annual subsidy to the *waqf*, allowing the foundation to facilitate the travel of around 400 Maghrebi pilgrims each year.

Yet, with the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in 1954, the situation became more complicated. France now had other military priorities. Most importantly, the residents of the Maghrebi Quarter began to challenge colonial interference. In 1957, the new commander of the Oran branch of the National Liberation Army (ALN), Mohammed Boukherouba, decided to demonstrate his attachment to the disputed border areas with Morocco by choosing “Houari Boumediene” as his *nom de guerre*, in homage to the patron saint of Tlemcen, Abu Madyan. The following year, the Algerian community of the *Waqf* Abu Madyan refused the aid offered by France. When Algeria gained independence in 1962, France suggested that the states of the Maghreb take over the funding of the Maghrebi *waqf* in Jerusalem. However, authorities in the newly independent Algeria neglected the issue—as did those in Tunisia and Morocco—because they were dealing with more general anti-colonial concerns.

A Planned Destruction

The most crucial moment in the investigation is the interview with historian Meron Benvenisti, who shared with the author both his personal archives and the archives of the Department of Public Works of the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem. The sources demonstrate that the destruction of the Maghrebi Quarter at the end of the Six-Day War was methodically prepared. This archival collection is especially important because the destruction of the neighborhood in a single night, presented by the Israeli authorities as a spoil of war, left few documentary traces. Lemire

supplements these sources with documents from the Jordanian municipal archives of Jerusalem, which he obtained from the son of chief engineer Yussuf Budeiri. At the bottom of a memo circulated by Teddy Kollek on May 31, 1967, a French consular officer wrote in longhand that a motor bus had been chartered for “100 persons,” suggesting that plans were being made to evacuate the residents of the Maghrebi Quarter. On June 8, 1967, David Ben Gurion reportedly took offense at the presence of toilets next to the Western Wall, prompting Yaacov Yannai, head of the National Park Authority, to call for the whole area to be cleaned up. During a meeting held on June 9, 1967, Teddy Kollek and General Uzi Narkiss ratified the decision to clear the “Kotel plaza” that did not yet exist. Although the demolition operations were entrusted to a private organization to avoid the involvement of municipal and military authorities, mention is made in the meeting report that the Water Works would come to clean up the newly created plaza on June 11.

On June 10, the 700 inhabitants of the Maghrebi Quarter were evacuated within a few hours, with orders to take nothing with them. The neighborhood’s 135 houses were demolished, and rubble filled the cisterns underneath. The al-Afdaliya mosque was also destroyed, even though this was not part of the initial plan. Very modest compensation was paid by the Israeli government to settle the claims of former residents, who were spread across different neighborhoods of the city. Years later in 1977, the expropriated residents received humanitarian assistance from the King of Morocco, prompting Israel to tolerate the hoisting of a Moroccan flag on one of the buildings bordering the destroyed neighborhood. The flag of Morocco continues to fly in Jerusalem today, even though the Palestinian flag has been banned from Israeli territory since January 2023.

In the Shadow of the Wall teaches us as much about the history of a Jerusalem neighborhood as it does about the work of the historian. We follow the material construction of the Maghrebi Quarter—both in stone and in archives—along with its appropriation by the various religious, municipal, and colonial powers. Lemire places the social practices of the different actors in their ideological contexts, heeding Maurice Halbwachs’s warning in *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre sainte* (1941) whereby “collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past” that constantly adapts “the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present.” In addition, the book calls for new research on this ancient neighborhood of Jerusalem that makes greater use of Arab sources—not only Palestinian and Jordanian sources, but also Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian ones. A good example of such research is the four-issue online journal [Le quartier des Maghrébins](#), created in 2015 by the Palestine

Committee of the Algerian National Construction Movement to commemorate the role played by Maghrebis in protecting the holy sites of Jerusalem.

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