

“Jerusalem should be open and available to all”: A Conversation about *Jerusalem Story* with Kate Rouhana*

“القدس يجب أن تكون للجميع”: حوار مع كيت روحانا عن
“القدس: القصة الكاملة”

Abstract: In this interview, Kate Rouhana, Founding Director of *Jerusalem Story*, sheds light on the website’s mission to offer in-depth research, analysis, and coverage of the Palestinian community in Jerusalem. The site blends rigorous research with journalistic and personal narratives, offering a comprehensive account of the city’s realities. Rouhana emphasizes that while Jerusalem is a cherished world heritage site that should be accessible to all, the on-the-ground reality is starkly different. The city was seized by Israel, and subsequent planning and policy decisions have been driven by an officially sanctioned demographic agenda, one aimed at maintaining a Jewish majority through settlement expansion and land confiscation. Against this backdrop, *Jerusalem Story* seeks to document and amplify the lived experiences and voices of Palestinians in the city.

Keywords: *Jerusalem Story*; Kate Rouhana; Palestinians; Jerusalem.

الملخص: في هذه المقابلة، تُسلط كيت روحانا، المديرية المؤسّسة لموقع «القدس: القصة الكاملة»، الضوء على رسالة الموقع المتمثلة في تقديم أبحاث وتحليلات وتغطية معمقة للمجتمع الفلسطيني في القدس. يمزج هذا الموقع بين البحث المتأني والسردي الصحافي والشخصي، مُقدِّمًا سردًا شاملاً لواقع المدينة. وتؤكد روحانا أنَّ القدس على الرغم من أنها تُعدّ موقعًا تراثيًا عالميًا ينبغي أن يكون متاحًا للجميع، فإنّ الواقع على الأرض مختلف عن ذلك كليًا. فقد استحوذت إسرائيل على المدينة، واتخذت قرارات التخطيط والسياسات بناءً على أجندة ديموغرافية مُعتمدة رسميًا، تهدف إلى الحفاظ على أغلبية يهودية من خلال التوسع الاستيطاني ومصادرة الأراضي. لذا، يسعى موقع «القدس: القصة الكاملة» إلى توثيق التجارب المعيشية للفلسطينيين في المدينة وإبراز أصواتهم.

كلمات مفتاحية: القدس: القصة الكاملة؛ كيت روحانا؛ الفلسطينيون؛ القدس.

* Kate Rouhana is a writer, editor, researcher, and instructional designer. She has lived and worked as a journalist and researcher in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine several times throughout her life. Her writing has been published in *The Nation*, *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, *South-North News Service*, *New Outlook Magazine*, and various US newsletters and magazines. She has edited numerous books on Middle Eastern topics. She holds an MA in Middle Eastern Studies and a BA in International Relations, both from Harvard University.



What is Jerusalem Story?

Jerusalem Story is a website that aims to tell the story of a unique city through a seldom-used lens – that of the city’s large and diverse Palestinian community. This community, which makes up nearly half of the city’s population, has deep historic roots in Jerusalem and holds the strongest attachment to and love for their city. Yet, it has been subjected to unrelenting efforts to erase its presence in, and potential claim to, the city – past, present, and future – to cement Israel’s claim of sole sovereignty over a “united Jewish Jerusalem”. These efforts, targeted through an overriding demographic imperative to maintain a Jewish majority to ensure control over the city, started decades ago and have taken myriad highly destructive forms, continuing to the present day, as is openly acknowledged by Israeli officials and decision-makers, and as our work amply documents.



Why focus on Jerusalem and its people?

Jerusalem is holy to billions of Muslims, Christians, and Jews around the world. It is a cherished world heritage site that should be open and available to all. Today, however, although Jerusalem is known as the “holy city” or the “city of peace”, the reality on the ground is starkly, darkly different. To understand what is happening in Jerusalem today, here is a little history.

Jerusalem was conquered by force by Israel in two stages, in 1948 and in 1967. In the first stage, involving 84% of the city’s area, almost all of the 75,000 Palestinian residents living there and in the 40 or so surrounding Arab villages were ethnically cleansed by Zionist forces pre-1948 and the Israeli army after that. Although Jerusalem had been designated for international status in the United Nation’s 1947 Partition Plan for Palestine, Israel seized this area, incorporated it into its state, and rapidly passed laws stripping its Palestinian population of citizenship. It seized all property and assets of Palestinians, banned their return, and made them stateless refugees. The city was thus emptied of Palestinians and divided. Israel

renamed this part of the city “West Jerusalem”. Many refugees ended up in the remaining 11% or so of the city, which Jordan annexed for the next 19 years and became Arab Jerusalem. In 1967, Israel occupied the rest of the city, defeating Jordan, and illegally imposed its laws in violation of international law. It also tripled the size of the newly occupied area, which it renamed East Jerusalem, unilaterally enveloping 28 Palestinian villages.

A rushed census found that although tens of thousands had been displaced out of the city, the newly occupied area still had nearly 66,000 Palestinians.¹ This was enough to radically alter the city’s demographic balance overnight: from 1% Palestinian in West Jerusalem before the 1967 War to 26% Palestinian in West and East Jerusalem after it.²

For the state, this posed an increasing existential threat: the possibility of losing control of the city if its Palestinians became a majority. From this point on, planning and policy decisions in Jerusalem were driven by an officially determined demographic imperative: to keep the Palestinian population contained at 26.5% or less.³

Today, Palestinians make up at least 40% of Jerusalem’s residents; mostly likely closer to 50%. Of those, 99% live in East Jerusalem, where they comprise at least 61% of the residents.⁴ These data cause Israeli state officials alarm. They are not shy to declare their intent to Judaize Jerusalem and maintain all of it under permanent Israeli control. In their eyes, the two most essential requirements for achieving this goal are maintaining a Jewish demographic majority and building settlements for Jews to seize and keep the land.

Hence, Jerusalem is a city whose officials are openly committed to removing as many of the native Palestinians who had lived in the city for centuries before Israel was founded and were citizens before 1948 by any and all means possible. Those who remain should be subjugated and Israelized, rendered docile and compliant within a state defined as exclusively for the Jews where others have no rights or political power and should not expect to get any.

Urban planning thus becomes a clear and explicit matter of causing one community (Jews) to thrive and flourish, while another (Palestinians) is continually controlled, surveilled, presumed to be hostile, and sent the unmistakable message that they are unwelcome interlopers – with every bureaucratic procedure, even the most mundane. Need to renew your driver’s license? Prove to the Ministry of Interior that your “centre of life” has been in Israel for the past seven years. Cannot prove it with the copious documentation required? Sorry, your legal status is revoked, and you must leave the city immediately.

In its relentless and ongoing attempts at removal and erasure of Palestinians on the one hand, and total dominance for Jews on the other, Israel has targeted the Palestinian community’s institutions, leadership, economy, societal fabric, educational system, language, history, culture, cemeteries, and much more. Anything that supports a potential Palestinian national claim to the city – past, present, or future – is ferociously targeted and often criminalized.

¹ Joel Perlmann, “Volume 6,” in: *The 1967 Census of the West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Digitized Version* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, November 2011-February 201) [digitized from Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, “Census of Population and Housing, 1967 Conducted in the Areas Administered by the IDF,” vols. 1-5 (1967-1970), and “Census of Population and Housing: East Jerusalem, Parts 1 and 2” (1968-1970); www.levyinstitute.org/palestinian-census], p. xi.

² Michal Korach & Maya Chosen, *Jerusalem Facts and Trends 2021: The State of the City and Changing Trends* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 2021), p. 17.

³ Inter-ministerial Committee to Examine the Rate of Development for Jerusalem, Recommendation for a Coordinated and Consolidated Rate of Development, Jerusalem, August 1973, p. 3. [Hebrew]

⁴ Omer Yaniv, Netta Haddad & Yair Assaf-Shapira, *Jerusalem Facts and Trends 2023: The State of the City and Changing Trends* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 2023), pp. 112-115.

Jerusalem Story aims to shine a light on these dystopian realities, and, in so doing, to bear witness and attempt to restore an extremely endangered community back into its own story. In the wake of Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, and its emptying of swathes of the West Bank in recent months, Jerusalem's Palestinians are imperiled.



What does Jerusalem Story offer to its audience?

Jerusalem Story offers in-depth research, analysis, and coverage of the story of the Palestinian community of Jerusalem. The site has a mix of research and more journalistic and personal features, so viewers can read both side by side: comprehensive, dispassionate facts alongside personal stories, interviews, case studies, and visuals that help bring those facts alive. Likewise, the site takes a multimedia approach, almost like an online museum, and offers print, stunning photos (including photo essays and photo albums), graphics, illustrations, videos, and interactive maps.

The site has a variety of sections. The website's starting point is called The Big Picture. In an animated display of powerful images overlaid with narrative text, The Big Picture pulls all the key points of our *Jerusalem Story* into one introductory highlights presentation.

The next section is comprised of themes and their subtopics, where content is organized around a specific key topic such as What Is Jerusalem? Who Are the Palestinians in Jerusalem? The West Side Story, Precarious Status, Land, etc. Each topic has its own landing page and menu for easy access.

Next is Jerusalem Notebook, our blog. In it, we feature all manner of stories about the Palestinian community of Jerusalem – from character or organizational profiles to interviews to historical sketches of landmarks and traditions, book reviews, and more.

We also have a Biographies section. Here we profile Palestinian Jerusalemites – past and present; famous and obscure – whose lives and stories have helped shape the larger *Jerusalem Story* and the story of their community within it over time.

Our Quick Facts section is a large set of FAQs about the *Jerusalem Story*. Where relevant, each Quick Fact is linked to a topic.

Our Lexicon offers clear and helpful definitions of the many terms that are unique in this arena, given its rootedness in many languages, as well as the legal, military, and technical jargon that has emerged over the decades of military occupation.

Finally, we have compiled a database of Palestinian organizations on the ground. This effort is important insofar as the Israeli authorities have made massive efforts over the decades to decapitate this community by closing down its institutions, and the ones that remain face countless challenges. Our database makes them and their work more accessible to users worldwide.



How is Jerusalem Story different from other mainstream media initiatives that cover Jerusalem?

The mainstream media uncritically accepts the hegemonic Israeli narrative about Jerusalem, which views the entire city as a Jewish one that will belong solely to Israel in perpetuity. As for the native Palestinians, they are depicted as “aliens” who apparently just arrived in 1967 when Israel occupied the east side of the city. Israel does its best to erase the unpalatable history of how West Jerusalem came to be exclusively Jewish and integrated into the State of Israel. This produces analyses and reporting that whitewash and erase the vital history of one half of the city’s population. *Jerusalem Story* aims to report on the city as it really evolved over recent history and as it truly is today, integrating the lived realities and voices of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians whose ancestors built and cherished their city and whose roots in it and rights to it should be, in any normal city, a matter of pride and honor, not a target for criminalization and erasure. It also shines a spotlight on the persistent and aggressive Judaization of a city that is holy to many religions – a world treasure.

Who contributes to Jerusalem Story?

We work with contributors around the world. The core team is mostly but not entirely Palestinian, and based both in the city and abroad, in various countries. Beyond the core team, we have a diverse network of freelancers developing content with us, including scholars, researchers, writers, photographers, video editors, graphic designers, and more.