It is now 6:45 am and as I lie on my bed next to the window, I can see the Jews outside coming and going; I say to myself when will the people of al-Baq’a return to their homes.

Journal entry by Jeryis al-Salti on October 23, 1949.

Sitting in his home in the southwestern suburb of Jerusalem of al-Baq’a, on a side street off the Bethlehem road, Jeryis al-Salti wrote in an unused calendar book from 1937 what became the first line in his year long diary. “We started writing in this diary on Friday May 13, 1949.” It had been a whole year since Salti, or any of the members of his household who remained with him at home, had seen any of their loved ones who departed for, or were living in, what had become the Jordanian side of the city. With him at home were his wife Mudallaleh; his three daughters Adele, Hind and Nada; his son Raja; his sister Nazha Sahar and her son

The Salti store in al-Shama’a before 1948. *Photographer unknown, the collection of Rasha Salti.*
Abdullah; and a second, unnamed sister. Al-Baq’a, along with the other neighboring Arab suburbs of the city—including al-Talbiya and the German Colony—had been until a year before home to some 30,000 Arab inhabitants. By then there were only ghost towns with what Salti thought were only about 200 remaining residents. For in the months of April and May, 1948, the inhabitants of those areas had left their homes avoiding the encroaching attacks by the Zionist militias.

But the Saltis had not left. They had stayed in their home for most of the passing year, leaving only for extreme necessities such as seeking food or going to see the lawyer who represented them in a case against the Israeli authorities. Although it looked like a deserted town, with no one on the streets, al-Baq’a still had a number of families who, like the Saltis, avoided being seen outside. The only passersby were cats, wild dogs, Israeli armored vehicles which could be seen now and then and irregular Jewish forces who would capture any Arab they came across and expel him to the Jordanian side of the city through the infamous Mandelbaum Gate crossing point near Sheikh Jarrah.

After the fall of this section of the city to the Zionist forces of the Haganah and the Palmach and the consequent partition of Jerusalem between Jordan and the newly created Jewish state, barbered wire and a ‘presumably’ demilitarized no-man’s- land separated the two parts of the city. The Mandelbaum Gate was the only crossing point between Israel and Jordan at the time. A United Nations peacekeepers’ camp
A map showing the no mans land between the two parts of the city. Source: www.passia.org.

was located between the two sectors of the city and named after a Jewish merchant whose house stood at the spot where the crossing point was. Only UN peacekeepers and international diplomats were allowed to cross the ‘gate’—with the exception of Christians from the Galilee who would be permitted to cross over to participate in the Christmas celebrations in the Old City. The gate was located in an area between the neighborhoods of Sheikh Jarrah on the Jordanian side and al-Masrara on the Israeli side where a number of houses, including that of Andoni Baramki, stood empty. The no-man’s-land that separated the two sectors of the city ran south from there towards Damascus Gate, from outside the wall of the city up west towards Jaffa Street, and then south by the wall of the Old City into al-Shama’a—a quarter which was completely destroyed and uninhabited. It was in al-Shama’a that the store owned by the Salti brothers stood. As part of the no-man’s-land, it was supposed to be under the control of neither side. The Saltis were unable to reach their shop to retrieve any of their property as they themselves were now divided between the two sides of the newly emerging borders that had sliced Palestine into two different countries. Al-Shama’a was in reality now a place that belonged nowhere and presumably to nobody. At the time when the world community, or a good portion of it, was celebrating the first anniversary of the creation of the state of Israel, Salti, his family and a handful of neighbors, were living lives in which the future was uncertain and the present unfamiliar, to say the least. It was in such conditions that Salti learned from a Jewish acquaintance that the Israeli army had ventured into the no-man’s-land and pillaged the entire content of the Salti Iron Store in al-Shama’a. Salti, whose existence within the boundaries of the state bordered on clandestine, suddenly had a cause that was worth fighting for. The pillaged contents of the store were estimated to be worth £100,000. In a small item entitled Supreme Court cases today, The Palestine Post of September 15, 1949, reported that Justice Dunkelblum was looking into a case that involved “the controller of Absentee Property and J. Salti represented by attorney Rabinovitz regarding the ownership of an Iron warehouse.”

Salti recorded meticulously everything related to the above mentioned court case in the journal. In fact, it is plausible that he kept the journal because of the case, in order to keep a record of all the events surrounding it, and in the process ended up documenting much more. Entries found in the journal relate not only to the court case, but included every day events, the endless search for food, items about the neighbors and contacts with relatives on the Jordanian side. Had it not been for the extraordinary conditions under which Salti was living, his journal could not have been anything but mundane. What does not appear in the journal is any reference to the national question or the larger political situation. It is possible that the hardships of daily life, such as scarcity of money and food, left Salti little time to contemplate issues of such nature. It is also possible that he was being very careful not to have a written record that could fall into the wrong hands and thus endanger his right to continue to reside in his hometown. The recorded entries chronicled his visits to,
and dealings with, his Jewish attorney, the court hearings and his efforts to collect evidence connected with the case.

Al-Baq’a, where al-Salti’s house was located, was an Arab suburb of the city that had gradually emerged since the late 19th century. According to the UN partition plan of 1947, it, along with the rest of Jerusalem was to become a corpus separatum under a special international regime to be administered by the United Nations and belonging to neither of the two states proposed by the resolution. But the western sections of Jerusalem, including al-Baq’a, had fallen under Israel’s control in 1948 and was initially considered by the transitional Israeli government as, “territories occupied by Israel.” However, following the signing of the armistice agreement with Jordan on April 3rd, 1949, the Israeli government declared that west Jerusalem was no longer considered occupied territory but part of the state of Israel. Although that decision annulled the military rule over Israeli-occupied west Jerusalem, the Arab inhabitants of the city remained subject to restrictions until November of that year. However, when the restrictions of movement were lifted and the remaining Arab residents were granted temporary identity cards by the state, many realized that their property had been confiscated by Israel. Despite the fact that the city had not been officially annexed by the state initially, the government had already “employed its absentee property regulations to confiscate all Arab homes, lands and businesses, including any contents that had not been already looted.” Those regulations were eventually codified in 1950 when the office of the Controller of Absentee Property was created per the Knesset law Number 20 of 1950 that appointed a custodian for property of Palestinian refugees including real estate, currency, financial instruments and other goods, and allowed rental of such property as well as lease and sale. Ironically, Palestinians who were in the Israeli section of Jerusalem, although not “absentees” as defined by the law, had their property treated as that of absentee’s and lost it. Many Palestinians in al-Baq’a, Qatamoun and Talbiyeh were not only not absentee, but were living inside the state, on the very same property that was confiscated. Palestinians living in their own houses found themselves forced to pay rent to a custodian as if their homes were in fact not theirs anymore. As the entry on June 22nd, 1949 in Salti’s journal explains:

Today a Jewish [meaning an Israeli] official went around the Arab houses and recorded the names of those residing there so they can start collecting rent from them.

Unaware of the above mentioned laws, the Saltis had started to spend their time in the larger nearby house of their absent sister Julia, who fled with her husband to Bethlehem, as they were able to find food stored there and had a larger space available to them and the relatives that had joined them. It appears that, he assumed his presence in the neighborhood would guarantee the safety of his own house, Salti believed that by staying in his sister’s house he would protect it from confiscation.
In September 1948, the Israeli authorities started to enclose a small area in al-Baq’a forming a security zone and enforcing more control over the Palestinians in the area, “A barbed-wire fence was erected enclosing an area about half a square mile.” Residents of this area that was now called “Zone A” were allowed to freely move inside it during the day, but were placed under curfew at night. As John Rose noted, “[t]he creation of the zone was not good news for the few who lived outside it. They were told that for their own protection they had to move into an abandoned house of their choice within the fenced area.” The Saltis were among those whose houses were outside of the zone and were therefore, forced to move into somebody else’s house inside the zone. Arab homes outside the zone were given by the authorities to Jews who needed homes with the aim of creating a new reality on the ground that would prevent the possibility of having to turn them over to the Arab side. But as the houses outside of the zone became occupied, Jews were now coming into the zone and taking over empty homes there. In fact, as Salti’s journal illustrated, Jews were starting to take over even inhabited Arab houses in the zone as well taking over sections and rooms in those houses. On October 19, 1949, Salti wrote “the situation is getting worst. The Jews are squatting even in inhabited Arab houses aiming to take over a room.” Eager to take over Arab homes, some Israeli zealots from outside of the area would drive noisy motorcycles in al-Baq’a in the late hours of the night making a commotion and hoping to scare off residents forcing them to leave the area and to abandon their homes.

One of Salti’s neighbors whose last name was Nino was not as “lucky” as those who had to “share” their homes. In one entry Salti mentions how for several days he had not seen his next-door neighbor and upon going to his home to check on him, he found
him dead as a result of a violent attack. The killers had covered the windows and the door tightly in order to hide the crime.

Theft was not limited to squatting in Arab homes, but had extended to raiding homes to take furniture, home appliances, doors and windows, bathroom tiles and even personal jewellery. John Rose, another resident of the zone, wrote the following account about what was happening in that period:

Next day at about four in the afternoon a truck stopped outside the front gates. Five armed men made their way to the top floor. We remained indoors and watched as they threw mattresses, cushions, bedding and other unbreakable items through the windows down to the garden below. Furniture they carried by the staircase. The last man to leave took the oude which he had found on top of the cupboard. The looters threw the keys back at us contemptuously and showed no regret for their actions. As soon as they were out of sight we went upstairs to tidy up what was left in the ransacked flat, much shaken by this threatening experience and dreading what would happen next.11

Echoing Rose’s account, Salti wrote of similar acts of looting in his journal. His entry on May 19, 1949, reads:

*Today they came [the Israelis] and took from Abu Judhum’s house the rest of his furniture. They even took the bathroom [tub, sink and tiles]. We shouted at them, but they did not pay any attention.*

When the zone was cancelled in November 1949, Palestinians tried to return to their homes outside of it. Much to their shock, they found their houses already occupied by new Jewish immigrants.

The Salti house was among those taken over by newcomers. The diary describes in details the intense negotiations with the occupants of the house who, at the end, agreed to vacate it in exchange for the one the Saltis had stayed in inside the zone.
New Jewish immigrants moving a couch in Ein Karem from one Abandoned Arab home to another, 1949.

If individual Jews did most of the looting, we should not assume that Government officials were not involved. Police searches of Arab homes under the guise of security were common and government officials were directly implicated in looting and theft just as were individual Israelis. Confiscation of property from homes was another form of theft that officials were conducting. The account about Mrs. Deeb documented on June 6, 1949 in Salti’s notebook illustrates this point:

Mrs. Deeb told us today that they [perhaps the police?] came to her home based on information that she has gold from the Old City. As they told her, gold is cheaper in the eastern section (only 4 pounds as apposed to 6 in Israeli controlled Jerusalem). Needless to say, they did not find any gold in her house.

The alleged information regarding Mrs. Deeb’s having acquired gold in the Old City points to the possibility that Israelis may have been aware of contacts between Palestinians on both sides of the barbed-wire. Such contacts were not only the result of the occasional visitor’s permits that the authorities would grant. They were also “illegal” contacts often established at the early hours of the morning between the two sides, across the barbed wire. Through these contacts goods, food and personal items would “travel” between both sectors of the city. Salti, whose food stock ran out and
Advertisement for cars distributed by Shukri Deeb, a relative of Mrs. Deeb: another lost business in the no mans land area of the city. Source: Institute for Palestine Studies.
who was prevented from shopping by virtue of his location and by lack of money was overjoyed by items brought to his family from the Jordanian side, as he himself wrote in the following entry dated May 24th, 1949:

*Sitt (madam) Nuha Halaby arrived from the Old City—on the Jordanian side of the city—and brought with her some stuff sent by Sami and Jeryis al-Lucy and the children of Abu Roufa. We were very happy with what we got, particularly with the cucumbers, tomatoes and meat. Hind and Adele were happy with their new shoes and Raja with the sandals and so was Um Sami with her new shoes as well. I was glad to see rice, sugar sent to us by George al-Lucy [...] and the two bottles of Arak (a popular strong spirit with high alcohol volume) and peanuts that he sent.*

The occasional visits of members of the community to the other side were rather limited and heavily restricted. Because of this people from both sides would meet at the fence that split the village of *Beit Safafa* into two sections after the Jordanian authorities agreed to seize control of the northern half of the village in May of 1949, following the signing of the armistice agreements. Several entries in Salti’s journal described the encounters they had with their relatives on the other side, threw that fence. As one can see from the diary, these encounters became highly meaningful for them and often constituted the highlights of their lives. On May 29, Salti made what appears to be his first visit to the partition village and met with his son and an in-law. He recorded that visit in his journal as follows:

*Today at 6 am we all went to Beit Safafa, including Nada and Raja [the youngest of the children]. There we saw Sami [Jeries’ older son] and my in-law George al-Lucy. We were very happy to see them and we prayed to God that nothing should happen that would ruin our reunion such as being seen by one of the Jews.*

*Beit Safafa* gradually became a point of regular encounters with family members, although the risk of being spotted by the police was also becoming increasingly higher. On June 1st, Salti wrote in his diary of an attempt to smuggle out a bed for a relative who, as they heard, having left all his belongings in his home in the west, was now sleeping on the floor.

*Um Sami and Raja went [to Beit Safafa] today from the early hours of the day, around 4:45 am.... They carried with them Basem’s bed, his comforter and mattress, a jacket and the meat grinder. Just as they left home, near the house of Far’oun, the police spotted them. They arrested them and took them to the station.*
*Source: Israeli Government Press Office.*
A little over two months later we learn that the fence at Beit Safafa had become the community’s window to the world. Members of the family would go the fence at great risk just to talk to anybody who would be on the other side. In his entry on August 20, 1949, Salti recorded such an event:

*The girls plan to go to Beit Safafa today. I tried to stop them by saying ‘why are you going? We don’t have anyone there.’ Anyhow, they prevailed and on the way back the police who found letters in their possession caught them. They were apparently carrying three letters one to Basil al-Mahshi, the second to al-Mushahwar and the third for Fouad Mushabek. The police thought that we have a relationship with the Arabs outside.*

Being caught by the police was not the only risk Palestinians on the Israeli side were taking when they went to the “border areas.” Salti’s entry on September 9, 1949, illustrates a tragic event that occurred when a family was on its way to that area:

*Today we heard the most terrible news. Yousef Abu Khalil and his five daughters were on their way to their original home—which was reduced to a pile of rubbles—on the road between Beit Safafa and Bethlehem to pick fruits from their trees. After they picked grapes and figs and were on their way back, a mine exploded under their feet. His most beautiful daughter of 23 was killed instantly, her two sisters are now hospitalized in critical conditions and Yousef himself was wounded.*

A few days later, Salti wrote in his journal one of the two wounded girls died in the hospital.

The journal describes the continuous visits to the lawyer and the court sessions. The lawyer, Rabinovitz, would regularly ask Salti to bring him gifts, including Whiskey smuggled from east Jerusalem. As the court case was on its way to be settled—with Salti winning the court case—the visits became more intense. Although the ruling was favorable, Salti was not getting any of the compensation money owed to him by the state. Eventually, negotiations with the authorities ended with him agreeing to receive only £10,000 instead of the £100,000 that the court had decided he was entitled to. Legal trouble with the authorities was not over, though. Salti was now threatening the authorities to return to court, this time to force the new occupants of his house to vacate it, upon their return from zone A. As I mentioned before, however, the solution to this problem came more as a result of negotiations than through the fair implementation of the law; the new immigrants agreed to vacate part of the house in return for the home where the family had been living in zone A in the zone. By the end of October, the Salti family was back in their own home in *al-Baq’a.*
Despite these small victories, Salti’s life was far from normal—as unveiled to us through his journal entries. Being possibly the first Arab to win a legal case against the state may have very well given him a small sense of victory but the victory was hardly complete, as only a small portion of the money was ever paid. Nor did it leave any significant mark on the mundane rhythm of life in al-Baq’a. Salti’s journal entries often reflect a sense of sadness and desperation. Surely not to be understood exclusively in relationship to his legal defeat and his troubles with the house, a pervasive feeling of sadness and pessimism runs throughout his diary, often in this form of oblique references and prayers at the end of each entry. Using terms such as “my patience is running out” and “the situation is rather depressing,” Salti was in effect reflecting on the state of liminality in which he and the remaining members of the Palestinian community found themselves.

The concept of liminal space has been described by Victor Turner as the “inter-structural situation” or the condition of betwixt and between.\(^\text{12}\) It refers to a situation—or a phase—of transition where the “normal” gives way to the exception, where a person finds themself in between two different worlds but not within either one of them. Being in between, therefore, assumes that incompatible elements of both worlds exist and are paradoxically juxtaposed and recombined.\(^\text{13}\) By being in Israel but not of it, the Arabs of west Jerusalem existed in a space of transition. They were neither fully in the state of Israel, nor did they have ties with the rest of their community outside of it. Their streets, houses, trees and gardens were there in front of their eyes, but they no longer belonged to them. Instead, they were surrounded by strangers who did not really see them, but saw their homes and belongings as booty they could easily claim. In this sense, despite the fact that they remained in their neighborhood, they shared the experience of displacement with other Palestinians. Salti’s account challenges the very possibility of Palestinians’ in west Jerusalem living a normal life in an un-normal condition. “Life in west Jerusalem might have appeared normal,” wrote John Rose, but “it was not so for us.”\(^\text{14}\) Their obliteration from everyday life around them, together with the opening up of their neighborhoods and property for Jewish settlers to appropriate, was symptomatic of the way in which Zionism saw the land of Palestine while negating its people.

It is precisely in this context that Salti’s journal is most significant. For it gives voice and an agency to the silenced Palestinians. And it does so without the slightest nationalist undertone. As one reads it, it becomes clear that the diary presents us with the thoughts, observations and experience of an individual trying to grapple with life altering historical events. And yet, or precisely because of that, it constitutes a powerful testimony with important ramifications of the Palestinian voices silenced in the dominant historical narrative of Israel’s founding. Not only does Salti’s account add to a more humanized and profound understanding of the Palestinian experience, but it also punches holes in the dominant Israeli self-righteous historical discourse. Salti’s journal, which in other contexts may have only been a record of the mundane,
offers us an exceptional opportunity to see Israel not as it imagined itself to be then—a project of salvation and redemption—but as what it was to the natives: a colonial project, if an idiosyncratic one. Salti’s diary partially documented the “record of domination” that Israeli colonialism was, and also offered us, and still does, the opportunity to witness this colonialist project’s “failures, silences and impasses.”

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Endnotes
3 Interview with Raja Salti, Ramallah August 7, 2007.
7 Krystall, “The Fall of the City”, 113.
8 An absentee, according to the above Israeli law, was a person who after November 29, 1947 had visited an Arab country or was a national of such a country, or who normally resided in Palestine but left his ordinary place of residence for a place outside of Palestine before September 1, 1948. See ibid, 113.
10 Ibid, 206.
13 Ibid, 354.