



Al-Lydd/Lod, How Many Defeated?

Yoann Morvan

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Al-Lydd/Lod, How Many Defeated?

Yoann Morvan

Traduction de Michèle Baussant

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RÉSUMÉS

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En mai 2021, diverses violences éclatent dans l'espace israélo-palestinien. Pour la première fois, celles-ci embrasent plus particulièrement les villes dites « mixtes », à savoir des localités situées au sein des frontières reconnues de l'État hébreu, et qui comportent jusqu'à nos jours une population d'au moins 10 % enregistrée comme « arabe » (selon le Central Bureau of Statistics israélien), c'est-à-dire palestinienne. À partir du récit de ces événements depuis al-Lydd/Lod – la cité la plus touchée par les émeutes urbaines entre Palestiniens, sionistes religieux et forces de l'ordre –, cet article les replace dans le temps plus long de l'histoire du conflit israélo-palestinien, ainsi que des migrations et de l'urbanisation/destruction afférentes. En effet, al-Lydd/Lod est à la fois l'épicentre de la Nakba, la « catastrophe » ou défaite initiale palestinienne (1948), et la localité par laquelle arrivent de nombreux migrants juifs du fait de sa proximité avec l'aéroport du pays. Parmi ces derniers, ceux qui restent habiter dans la localité appartiennent pour la plupart à des populations subalternes au sein de la société israélienne. Tandis qu'un fragile et inéquitable équilibre semblait jusqu'alors prévaloir dans ce contexte paupérisé, l'implantation de militants sionistes religieux, au cours de la dernière décennie, paraît avoir bouleversé la donne et suscité de nouvelles tensions. L'épisode de violence du printemps 2021 s'inscrit dans cette évolution, synonyme d'énième humiliation non seulement pour les Palestiniens de citoyenneté israélienne, mais aussi, à un degré moindre, pour certains groupes juifs, notamment ceux dits « orientaux ».

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Mots-clés

[Israël/Palestine](#), [Palestine/Israël](#), [villes « mixtes »](#), [populations subalternes](#), [violences urbaines](#)

Keywords

[Israel/Palestine](#), [Palestine/Israel](#), [mixed cities](#), [subaltern populations](#), [urban unrest](#)

10 May 2021. This is the month of Ramadan, which is also marked by Jewish and/or Israeli celebrations.¹ Tension has been building up day in day out, especially (but not only) in Jerusalem in the Sheikh Jarrah district and around the holy sites. I am travelling to Lod with my friend Benji Boyadgian, a Palestinian artist of Armenian descent, to produce a painting for a future exhibition. It is also an opportunity to meet Tawfik Da'adli, a lecturer at the Hebrew University, originally from this ancient city whose tragic history remains relatively unknown, of which he is one of the experts. As is often the case, a disillusioned discussion broached, as much about the fate of this locality, as the general Israeli-Palestinian space and its overarching post-Ottoman region. It is a great meeting, between (relative?) believers of each of the three monotheisms, in the shade of a tree, on the edge of the old town. As we walk back to the new, ultra-modern and somewhat oversized station, Tawfik narrates the story of his family, who used to work for the railway company. This activity saved the family during the 1948 war, when the overwhelming majority of the thousands of Palestinian residents of al-Lydd, the Arab name of the city, were forced into exile following the massacre of several hundreds of them (undoubtedly one of the worst episodes of the Nakba)². Thus, as we depart in the late afternoon, already shrouded by spring-like warmth, we have no idea that only a few hours later, like never before over the previous seventy years, violence would erupt and overwhelm Lod.

The atmosphere radically changed during the evening and night of 10 May. In 2021, this date corresponded to "Yom Yerushalayim" ("Jerusalem Day"), an Israeli national holiday established after the Six-Day War (1967) to celebrate the "reunification" of the city after the Hebrew state conquered its eastern part. As provocations from religious Zionist militants marked this celebration, Hamas issued an ultimatum demanding the evacuation of Israeli armed forces from the holy sites before sending salvos of missiles, some landing in Jerusalem. Tsahal responded by shelling Gaza. However, unlike the war that broke out in the summer of 2014, the conflict was not circumscribed to this confrontation or these territories. Presently, because of the immediacy of social networks (or "Tiktok intifada"), the so-called "mixed" cities³ were set ablaze. On 18 April, two Palestinian residents of Jaffa (of Israeli citizenship) had already attacked religious Zionists. The latter ambioned to extend their land hold on the area, which is also prey to the Tel Avivian dynamics of gentrification. However, the height of these tensions occurred in Lod, a deprived town, until then known more as a hub for drug trafficking or its Palestinian rap group Dam.

On the evening of 10 May, groups of young Israeli Palestinians took to the streets around the old town, torching rubbish bins and cars and wrecking places identified as Jewish, including a synagogue. They soon confronted religious Zionists, who had settled in Lod some years earlier, to revitalise/Judaize the city since they considered it under threat. They then exchanged stones and Molotov cocktails. Overwhelmed by the riots, the police remained strangely passive. There were armed men among the religious Zionists, whom the local Palestinians call "settlers". At around 1 a.m. shots were fired: Moussa Hassouna, a young father of 32, collapsed.⁴ The next day, at 3 p.m., the funeral procession carrying his body to the Muslim cemetery triggered riots anew, this time against the police, before they withdrew. This event marked the outset of a wave of violence that spared no-one: Jewish passers-by were attacked, the police evacuated alarmed residents, and their homes were sometimes looted or even destroyed, vehicles were torched, and the new museum of Roman mosaics was partially vandalized. The rioters also attacked a motorist, Igal Yehoshua, a 56-year-old electrician residing in Lod for many years (in the predominantly Russian district of Ganei Aviv), as he was driving back home. They blocked his way and threw bricks at the windscreen of his car. Hoping they would recognise him, he opened the window but ended up being lynched all the same. Brought to the hospital in a critical condition, he succumbed to his injuries a week later.⁵

The fragile balance of cohabitation that had seemingly prevailed for decades was shattered in just a few hours. Groups of religious Zionists set up vigilante militias in an atmosphere that increasingly looked like a civil war. Back-up converged from the West Bank settlements and they substituted themselves for the police forces. The latter could indeed not intervene, although auxiliary troops from the border force had joined them. Suddenly, informal checkpoints were set up by the various belligerents, dividing the town. A state of emergency was declared in Lod on 12 May. Nevertheless, Benny Gantz, Minister of Defence, did not authorise the intervention of the army demanded by Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister. The curfew in force from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. failed to reduce the violence. Responding to the belligerent calls of the muezzin, the hitherto "unpoliticized" organized crime thugs engaged in clashes with the border force, using guns and hitting a Jew who was not taking part in the riots. The far right-wing Jewish militias also attacked a Palestinian and left a pregnant woman injured in her head: she was transported to the hospital and started labour to give birth. To add to the general confusion, a missile launched by Hamas from Gaza, subjected to intense Israeli shelling, fell on Dahmash, a village⁶ near Lod, killing two Palestinians: Khalil Awwad, 52, and his 16-year-old daughter, Nadeen. The whole situation was chaotic.

¶The riots were to fade away a week later, and the state of emergency was lifted on 17 May. However, Lod had been under the national and international media spotlight. It provoked somewhat extravagant political comments, with some Israeli officials comparing the anti-Jewish attacks to pogroms. Mayor Yair Revivo went so far as to compare them to “Kristallnacht”. In Israel/Palestine, the city became the epicentre of a new type of conflict between neighbours. Why al-Lydd/Lod?

¶The waves of unprecedented violence of the spring of 2021 placed the so-called “mixed” at the very heart of the conflict. In the early 2000s, during the second Intifada, some clashes had occurred in Jaffa or Saint John of Acre. However, it was incomparable to the repression suffered by the Palestinians in the West Bank. This time, these bi-national urban entities,⁷ inherited from the 1948 war and located within the recognized borders of the Hebrew state, found themselves at the centre of Israeli-Palestinian tensions. The surprise was total, as the status quo imposed by the Israeli authorities, based on ethnic-religious segregation, was considered as unshakeable. In all the “mixed cities”, from Haifa (in the north of the country) to Ramla (near Lod), known for their allegedly peaceful coexistence, the *modus vivendi* seemed to have been shattered. However, after the Nakba, struggling with the difficulties of a forced and asymmetrical coexistence,⁸ these hybrid towns have been, since 1948, subject to significant tensions between Jews and Palestinians (of Israeli citizenship) for the control of space of residence and symbolic places, amidst nationalist nostalgia and lack of historical recognition. The shift of the conflict lines to the occupied West Bank has more or less covered up this situation. Following the 1967 war, the dispute generated by colonisation had somehow substituted itself for the Nakba’s more profound, latent dispute.

¶The 1948 war of “independence” for the Zionists and “catastrophe” (“Nakba”, in Arabic) for the Palestinians sparked many controversies. One of them concerns the scale of the exactions committed by the armed forces that became Israeli after their victory. However, the fall of al-Lydd through the “Dani” operation, with gunshots fired in a mosque where dozens of inhabitants took refuge, was undoubtedly the worst war episode. This tragedy could be considered the uricide of this multi-millennial city.

Situated in the heart and at the crossroads of a fertile region, populated since the Canaanite era, Lod is one of those rare towns displaying all the historical strata of the country. Mentioned in the Bible and then in the Talmud, Lydda fell to the Romans in 70 AD and became a colony in 200 AD, bearing the name of Diospolis, then underwent Christianization. In the 6th century, the city was renamed Georgiopolis in reference to Saint George. He was buried there (303), and a sanctuary was dedicated to him from the Byzantine period. The Islamic conquest in 636 marked a turning point in the city’s history, as the Muslims founded Ramleh in 716 and made it the capital of Palestine. From then on, al-Lydd and ar-Ramlah, distant only a few kilometres, have been rivals until they recently merged into a single town. Re-conquered by the Crusaders (1099), who restored the town’s importance in honour of Saint George, al-Lydd fell under Muslim sovereignty under the Mamluks (1267). They made of the town a regional administrative centre (“wilaya”). Nevertheless, the incorporation into the Ottoman Empire (1517) restored the primacy of ar-Ramlah, designated as the sub-district’s capital (“nahiya”). In the mid-19th century, al-Lydd counted several thousand inhabitants (one-third Christian, two-thirds Muslim and a few Jewish merchants) who lived mainly in the town’s many orchards. The city then experienced a demographic boom, especially after its connection to the railway network (1892), the first in the region. This expansion proceeded during the British mandate, notably with the opening of the international airport (1935). Finally, the war of 1948 disrupted the dynamic urban trajectory of this multi-millennial city.

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“Lod indulged itself in a state of apathy in ever-lasting mourning”, writes Elias Khoury in *Les enfants du ghetto* (2018, p. 245). “Lod fell on 11 and 12 July 1948. When I write the verb ‘fall’, my impression is that the city fell into an abyss; so I do not think this verb suits to describe the occupation of cities in wartime. Armies invade cities, but they do not normally bring them down. Lod was not occupied, but it fell, was dismantled and it disappeared”, the Lebanese writer continues through his narrator (*Ibid.*, p. 245). The Israeli soldiers nicknamed the “ghetto” the perimeter where they confined the minority of Palestinians who did not flee the massacres. In their case, the suffering was enormous, especially as they saw their property outside this perimeter confiscated by the recently created state.⁹ Thus, the olive and orange fields, which accounted for the town’s prosperity, were considered abandoned, while the actual farmers were locked up a few hundred metres away. After they decried such an injustice, they received an absurd and paradoxical status: that of “absent present”.

¶In July 2021, I returned to Lod for a visit organized by Zochrot, an Israeli association dedicated to raising awareness of the Nakba among Jewish audiences. Towards the end of the day, after several historical explanations in situ, two Palestinian women stepped forward: first, a middle-class and middle-aged Christian woman who recalled her family’s trajectory after the tragic summer of 1948, the impossibility

of forgetting and the difficulties of starting their lives again; then, a young Muslim girl of more working-class but educated background who, for her part, recounted how she suffered the events of May 2021, while she was not allowed to leave her neighbourhood, and she drew a parallel with the accounts of the 1948 “ghetto” experience. The feeling of disempowerment over the violence of May 2021 seems to be widely shared by the inhabitants of Lod, caught between the warring groups. Indeed, this testimony echoes the discourses of most of my Jewish interlocutors. It allowed me to understand how, during the riots, the vast majority of the population became trapped in clashes that brought back painful memories. For example, Bernard and his wife came to Lod to see their daughter. The latter unluckily lived in the same building as the religious Zionist that shot Moussa Hassouna, the Palestinian killed on 10 May night. They were unable to leave the place for several days, reviving Bernard’s painful memories of his adolescence during the Algerian war (1956-1962). The situation revived Jonathan’s trauma, a 30-year-old French-Israeli man whose family is originally from Tunisia and has been living in Lod since the 1950s. His trauma stemmed from the three wars (in Gaza twice, in 2008/2009 and 2014, and in Lebanon, in 2006) he fought as an infantryman and the atrocities he committed and/or suffered.

¹⁰In Lod, defeats have been piling up. Since 1948, the town has welcomed waves of heterogeneous groups of subaltern populations. Next to the ruined al-Lydd, the authorities launched a new town with a labelled “of development” (1950). This two-headed and awkward urban space then “welcomed” Palestinians from the surrounding villages, wiped off the map, and Jews from rural areas, especially from the Maghreb, established there under the rule of the nascent Zionist state. These so-called “Oriental” Jews were sometimes initially offered houses inhabited until recently by evicted Palestinians. This type of settlement participated in their double relegation: socio-ethnic and spatial. ¹⁰ The construction of mass housing and housing estates led to a “push and pull” ¹¹ residential dynamic made up of cascades of avoidance. The old new neighbourhoods, initially modernising “inhabiting machines” for the “Oriental” Jews, gradually deteriorated as impoverished populations, notably Palestinians, moved in. At the same time, the better-off residents and the new generations moved out to individual middle-class houses or left Lod as soon as possible. While some Palestinians still live in informal housing abandoned by the public authorities, the municipality endeavoured to implement its (re)development by the ever more centrifugal construction of new Jewish neighbourhoods from a clientelist perspective. The only geographical exception to this logic is the municipality’s support, since the 2010s, to families of religious Zionist militants settling down in the central sectors, particularly those of the old town. This counter-current movement, destabilizing a precarious social equilibrium, undoubtedly contributed to violence flaring up.

¹¹For the first time in the short history of Lod, a social group voluntarily chose to reside in the town. Until then, people had been sent or had relocated for lack of a better solution and more or less resigned themselves to remaining there. In one way or another, but to varying degrees, it is possible to consider these heterogeneous social strata as a pile-up of the defeated, the excluded, the dominated or the neutralized. ¹² Obviously, this is the case for the Palestinians, who represent a third of the local population (around 25,000 out of more than 75,000 inhabitants), and who are far from constituting a homogeneous block: a few hundred Christians; and, for the rest, Muslims, but with important internal subdivisions, notably with numerous sedentarized Bedouins from the south, or former collaborators of the Israeli army discreetly exfiltrated during the 1990s—who have been offered a house and protection. Due to its proximity to the airport, Lod serves as a gateway for people arriving in Israel. The locality has welcomed all the waves of Jewish migration (“aliyot”). Still, those who have stayed are among the least integrated or most disadvantaged: the “Orientals” (in Hebrew “mizrahim” (1950-1970), perceived by critical historiography as “victims of Zionism” ¹³; those who fled the former USSR (1970-1980); those who came to Israel in the 1970s and 1980s; and those who came to Israel in the 1980s; those who fled the former USSR (1970-2000), in particular Georgians, refused to be dispersed as advocated by the so-called absorption migration policy; those from Ethiopia (1980-1990), divided along generational lines (old/young), were of concern to social services. More recently (since 2010) (non-Jewish) labour migrants, notably Ukrainians and sub-Saharan, ended up in the back alley of Tel Aviv capitalism too.

¹⁴If these heterogeneous populations, antagonistic and complementary, hardly form a harmonious and consensual whole, they nevertheless participate in socio-urban regulation from below, accommodating each other as best they can, mainly through trade activities. However, the arrival of new neighbours (and their exacerbated nationalism) belonging to religious Zionism contributed to unravelling this complex and tenuous fabric of relations amongst “relegated populations” and is likely to sow the seeds of discord through Judeo-centric polarisation. This new component, mainly of Ashkenazi origin and generally affiliated with the Garin Torani group (“Seed of Torah”, in Hebrew), are engaged in conquering. Economically opportunistic, they bought every flat to push away the “Arab” residents and to secure their religious expansionist ambitions among the local Jews, most often Oriental.

13 This colonisation is an ongoing multi-directional dynamic from within, in a context of relative defeat, thus inflicting further humiliation ¹⁴ anew on the various inhabitants. Like the colonisation of the West Bank and closely linked to it, it relies on an imaginary, borderless society, but this time with internal peripheries as a horizon, in al-Lydd/Lod, at the very centre of the Palestinian-Israeli space. There, the gaping wound of the Nakba is conspicuous, in the landscape of the wastelands of memory and the emptiness of a so-called mixed city in decay.

Image 1



Title: Échouages. Sur les ruines de 48 (al-Lydd), watercolour on paper, 60 x 50 cm, 2021.

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- 1 As for "Jerusalem Day" (see below), the Hebrew State added festivities (linked to politico-historical events, such as the "reunification" of Jerusalem in 1967 or the proclamation of national independence in 1948) which did not belong to the "traditional" Jewish calendar.
- 2 By the term "Nakba", the Palestinians refer to the "catastrophe" that the 1948 war represents for them and its consequences until today.
- 3 In Israel, according to the definition of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), a city is considered "mixed" if at least 10% of its inhabitants are registered as "Arab".
- 4 The suspects were released on 13 May, deemed to be in legitimate self-defence, and had a licence to carry a weapon... They will be finally acquitted in October 2021.
- 5 He was registered as an organ donor and donated his kidneys to a Palestinian-Israeli Christian patient.
- 6 This Palestinian village is not recognised by the Israeli authorities; it has no anti-aircraft shelters.
- 7 "Mixed" cities are thus described as bi-national because two "nations" co-exist: one Jewish-Israeli, the other Palestinian (although of Israeli citizenship).
- 8 Daniel Monterescu, *Jaffa Shared and Shattered: Contrived Coexistence in Israel/Palestine*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015; Danna Pirovsky, *Ramle Remade: The Israelisation of an Arab Town, 1948-1967*, Haifa, Pardes Publishing, 2014.
- 9 A declaration of independence was issued on 14 May 1948, leading to the beginning of the war, which ended on 30 March 1949.
- 10 Haim Yacobi, *The Jewish-Arab City. Spatio-politics in a mixed community*, Routledge, 2009.
- 11 This theory, now quite classical although not devoid of criticism, initially aimed at grasping migratory phenomena; it was initially introduced by Everett S. Lee in the article "A Theory of Migration", in *Demography*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1966, p. 47-57.
- 12 Of course, relative exceptions exist, such as the congregation of 'Habad Loubavitch, characterized by its intra-Jewish proselytism. This community in Lod is located in a neighbourhood on the edge of the township on the route to Ramla. This congregation, quite popular at the level of global Judaism, is nevertheless rather disregarded in Israel, notably by the various currents of Jewish orthodoxy. Thus, it is probably not completely surprising to see the congregation flourishing in Lod, where it partly relies on post-Soviet populations, particularly Georgians (see below), who appreciate it greatly. However, the congregation is far from predominant at the local level (unlike the religious Zionists) in the spheres of the chief rabbinate of the city and the municipality (both controlled by "Moroccan" Jews).
- 13 I borrow the expression from Ella Shohat, *Le sionisme du point de vue de ses victimes juives*, La Fabrique éditions, 2006. The bibliography on this topic is too abundant to cite here. However, let us mention the recent documentary *Mizrahim, les oubliés de la Terre Promise*, by Michale Boganim, June 2022.
- 14 Olivier Abel, *De l'humiliation : le nouveau poison de notre société*, Les Liens qui libèrent, 2022.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Image 1

Title: Échouages. Sur les ruines de 48 (al-Lydd), watercolour on paper, 60 x 50 cm, 2021.

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Yoann Morvan est anthropologue, chargé de recherche au CNRS (Mesopotamie, Aix-Marseille Université), spécialiste d'anthropologie urbaine et économique. Ses travaux portent sur des métropoles euro-méditerranéennes, moyen-orientales et post-soviétiques (notamment Istanbul, l'espace israélo-palestinien, Erbil, Bakou, Tbilissi, Marseille), sur plusieurs diasporas juives (de Turquie, du Caucase et de Djerba) et sur l'articulation des aires culturelles. Il a publié plusieurs livres, dont *Méga Istanbul. Traversées en lisières urbaines* (avec Sinan Logie, Le Cavalier Bleu, 2019) ; et a codirigé, avec Thierry Boissière, *Un Moyen-Orient ordinaire. Entre consommations et mobilités* (Diacritiques Éditions, 2022).

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Among her publications, let us remind: *Israel. A Diaspora of Memories*, edited with Dario Miccoli and Esther Schely-Newman (*Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* [Online], no. 16, 2019, URL: <https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/?issue=16>) ; "Seeing the Voices": Egyptian Jews from one Shore to Another (Europe, Israel, United States)", in Sian Sullivan, Michèle Baussant, Lindsey Dodd, Olivette Otele, and Irène Dos Santos (eds), *Disrupted histories, recovered pasts* (*Conserveries mémorielles* [Online], no. 25, 2022, URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/cm/4854>) ; « De quels exils sont faites les mémoires ? », in Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc (eds), *La mémoire collective en question(s)* (Paris, PUF, forthcoming in 2022).

Michèle Baussant est directrice de recherche en anthropologie au CNRS. Elle travaille actuellement au Centre français de recherche en sciences sociales de Prague (ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères et Centre national de la recherche scientifique) sur un projet consacré aux mémoires intra et extra-européennes des populations déplacées, en les croisant avec celles des groupes qui sont restés ou sont venus s'installer dans les espaces en partie dépeuplés. Elle a également travaillé au Québec (Canada) à l'Université Laval et au Centre français de recherche de Jérusalem (Israël). En outre, elle coordonne et a supervisé plusieurs programmes de recherche nationaux et internationaux. Son expérience interdisciplinaire l'amène à travailler avec d'autres spécialistes des sciences sociales (historiens, sociologues, politologues, géographes, économistes, psychologues).

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