

Palestinian Palaces Without Monarchs: What Is Left of the Mansions Built Before 1948?

The impressive structures built by Arabs during the British Mandate and the Ottoman period are still scattered over Israel. They embody the story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and safeguard the stories of the families who once lived in them



Zen Read



Arab palaces of the past, as they are in Israel today. 'A story that is at once fascinating and evoking great sorrow,' tour guide Yoav Avneyon notes. Credit: Rami Shlush, Yoav Avneyon, Amir Levy, xiquinhosilva



Ofer Aderet

Nov 3, 2024



Follow

Tour guide Yoav Avneyon still remembers the day he first saw a picture of the Abu Aljiban House while scouting for historical photographs of Eretz Israel in the web. Of the multiple black-

and-white images, one caught his eye, "some crazy villa on top of a hill," he describes. The captions didn't reveal much: "On the way to Rehovot," it said, next to the year 1932. With the help of some keen on history friends, he pinpointed the exact location of the structure on the outskirts of the village of Beit Dajan. "All three of them – the houseowner, the house and the village – rest in peace now," he says.

The talks between Avneyon and his friends paved the way for a fascinating research journey through Arab mansions built in Israel in Ottoman and British Mandate times – across Beit Dagan, Nes Tziona, Beit Guvrin, Rahat, Zikim and Be'er Sheba – and beyond. Some are in shambles, sometimes almost entirely. Others still stand, occasionally even reconstructed or rebuilt. According to Avneyon, all those mansions, regardless of their state, tell "a story that is at once fascinating and evoking great sorrow."



The Abu Aljiban house before demolition, on the outskirts of the village of Beit Dajan. 'All three of them - the landlord, the house and the village - rest in peace,' the tour guide says. Credit: G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection / Library of Congress

The house belonging to Zohdi Abu Aljiban, son of a wealthy and

respected Jaffa family who owned lands and citrus groves, was razed to the ground. Today, on a hill where it used to stand there is but a little monument and some ruins. It is hard to imagine the grandeur and glitz of the now-decayed mansion, which Abu Aljiban began to plan in the 1930s with three [well-known Jewish architects: Richard Kauffmann, Yehiel Segal and Yitzhak Rapoport](#).

"The house was designed with a central space and an arched facade, like plantation houses of his effendi neighbors, but once the frame of the house was completed, Aljiban had a change of heart and decided to change the house to the International Style that was beginning to appear in Jewish neighborhoods," recounts architect and historian Samuel Giler in an article in "Et-Mol" periodical. In the end, says Giler, the Jewish architects "created one of the most beautiful houses in Israel".

Israel At War: Get a daily summary directly to your inbox

Email *

danaty@hotmail.com

Sign Up

Please enter a valid email address

Arab palaces in Israel



1 Dayr al-Qassi

Location Moshav Elkosh **Year of construction** 1930 **Original owner** Majid Al-Sadeq, village mukhtar **Currently** deserted



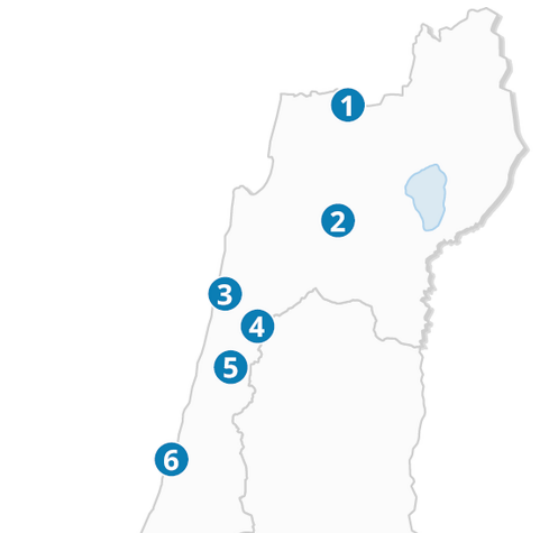
2 Fauzi Azar House

Location Nazareth **Year of construction** 1830 **Original owner** Fauzi Azar, member of a distinguished family **Currently** hotel



3 Zeronya khan

Location Binyamina **Year of construction** late 19th century **Original owner** Bosnian effendi Sadeq Pasha **Currently** privately owned by the Mozes family



4 Qasr al-Hamdan

Location Baka al-Garbiyeh **Year of construction** 1955 **Original owner** Faras Hamdan, head of the local council and later MK **Currently** deserted



5 Nablusi House

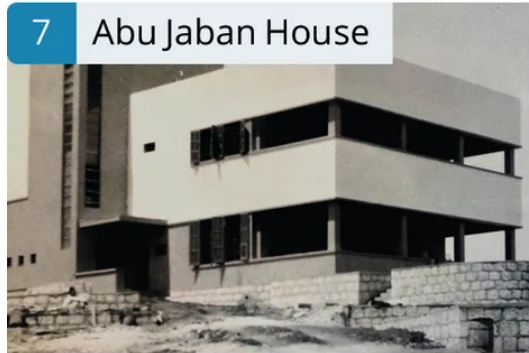
Location Kfar Yona **Year of construction** late 19th century **Original owner** Radi Nablusi, a Nablus businessman **Currently** deserted



6 Hizavon Citadel

However, the remaining plaque recounts the grim end of this mansion, that was blown up in a military raid, [commanded by Shlomo "Chich" Lahat](#) [the future seventh mayor of Tel Aviv] in February, 1948. This was a retaliation for a terrorist attack carried out two weeks earlier, when Jewish passengers were injured in a bus that hit a landmine on the way from Rishon Letzion to Mikveh Israel boarding school.

The trail led to Hassan Salameh and his men, and hence to the house. This, despite the fact that the houseowner, Zohdi Aljiban, was not considered an extremist and was even friendly with his Jewish neighbors. "The building's fate was sealed and all that remains today of the grand plantation house are some ruins in the yard — a hexagonal stone pool under a large fig tree, and the fragments of a ceramic-plated pool," Giler says.



7 Abu Jaban House

Location Rishon Letzion
Year of construction 1930s
Original owner Zohdi Abu Aljiban, an owner of orchards
Currently ruins; building demolished in 1948

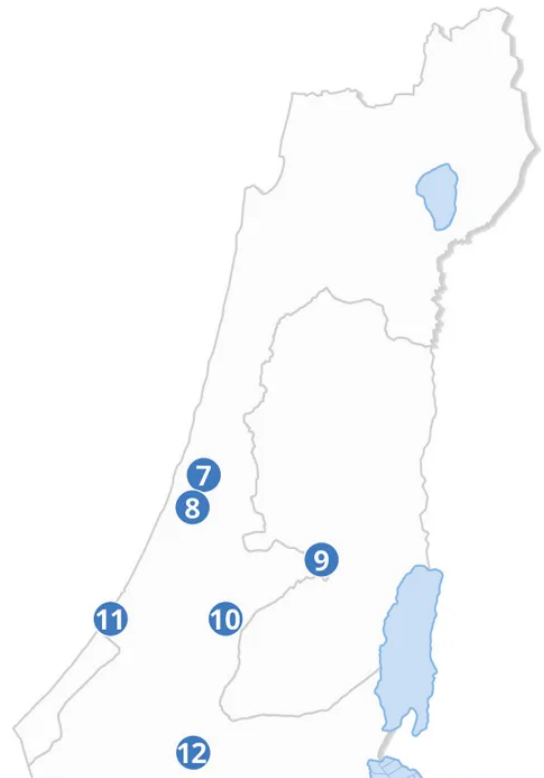


8 Abdul Rahman Al-Taji House

Location Nes Tziona
Year of construction 1923
Original owner Abdul Rahman Bey Al-Taji, an owner of orchards
Currently the Be'er Yaakov-Nes Tziona mental health center



9 Villa Salameh



10 Villa Beit Joubrin

Location Beit Joubrin
Year of construction 1943
Original owner the Al-Azzi family
Currently abandoned



11 Alami House

Location Kibbutz Zikim
Original owner Hafez Al-Alami, the brother-in-law of Moussa Al-Alami, a leader of the Palestinian national movement
Currently kibbutz museum



12 Aref Aref House

Capturing Israel's Destruction of Its Own Past

The Amazing UNESCO Site Going to Waste in Israel

Collection of Old Letters Tell of Love and Longing in Israel's Early Years

He further points out that Abu Aljiban's life story is representative of the Palestinian aristocracy tragedy in the last decade of the British Mandate, "when leadership devolved during the Arab rebellion from fez-wearing effendi class to keffiyeh-wearing gangs," he says.

"The extremists took over the country's towns, and terrorized those who dissented," he recounts, saying that a month and a half after the house was demolished by the Israeli military, its Arab owner petitioned for compensation to the military governor of Ramla. This petition apparently went unanswered. Ever since, he led business from his exile in Beirut.



Ruins of the Abu Aljiban house, near Rishon Letzion. Credit: Yoav Avneyon



Ruins of the Abu Eljivan house, near Rishon Letzion. 'All that remains today of the grand plantation house are some ruins in the yard — a hexagonal stone pool under a large fig tree, and the fragments of a ceramic-plated pool,' Giler says. Credit: Yoav Avneyon

Pyramids in the Galilee

Another mansion is located on the other side of the country, in moshav Elkosh, near the Lebanon border. It did survive [the War of Independence](#), but stands deserted today. This mansion was the home of the village's mukhtar, Abed Majid Al-Sadeq, one of the last remnants of the Muslim village of Dayr al-Qassi, inhabited until 1948. "This is one of the amazing houses that survived in the Galilee," says Avneyon, recounting how, when he first went inside it, he blurted out a big "wow." He says that the murals that welcomed him were "extraordinary and impressive. "The ceiling looks like a carpet," he adds, "there is a wealth of colors and styles there, of beauty and harmony of colors, well-preserved despite the place being open." Paintings of pyramids caught his eye. "Pyramids in the Galilee," he says with a smile. After studying them [Mahmoud Yazbak](#), associate professor at the University of Haifa, discovered that similar motifs were painted in other Arab houses around the country. The house is also decorated with Quran verses, created by calligrapher Mouhamad Ali, son of the Bahá'í faith founder.

During Israel's War of Independence, the village was deserted and sheltered [Jewish immigrants from Yemen and Kurdistan](#). "We must not forget of the families that used to live in these houses," warns Giler, pointing to another curious mansion in

Nes Tziona. Built in 1923, it was the abode of Ramla-born Abdul Rahman Bey Al-Taji, who owned citrus groves, a soap factory and an olive oil press. The living room in the villa was covered with expensive Persian carpets, oil paintings hung on its walls and a grand piano stood in the center. Royalties, including princess Mary, daughter of king George V, was a guest here on her visit in 1934.

Avner Kahana, a longtime Nes Tziona resident, wrote about his Arab neighbor Abdul Rahman: "He was true to his name, Rahman ('Merciful'), wise and kind, he gave a lot of help to the colony and its people, and even aided the entire Yishuv to purchase land. A friend." Giler adds that, under Ottoman rule, Rahman "saved the colony's farmers from expulsion, having rented some land for grain cultivation and listed the colony's farmers as his employees."



The village of Dayr al-Qassi, in 1949. During the War of Independence, the village was abandoned and sheltered immigrants from Yemen and Kurdistan. Credit: Zoltan Kluger / National Library

In his memoir, Jaffa merchant and public figure Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche calls Rahman "a righteous gentile" listing all his help. "When his son, Avner, was arrested for service in the Turkish

military," Giler says, "it was Abdul Rahman who rescued him from the military's hands, paying the Turkish authorities 40 sacks of clean flour as ransom. When Yosef Eliyahu and his family were expelled from Tel Aviv in 1917, and the country was undergoing famine, Abdul Rahman provided the family with ten sacks of flour and some camels, free of charge."

Abdul Rahman died in 1945, and during Israel's War of Independence his family moved to Jordan. The mansion was later transformed into a rest home for wounded Jewish soldiers. In her journal, nurse Estherke Avni (Kantor) recalls: "We arrived there and stopped at the foot of the hill. We walked into a citrus grove... Suddenly, a mansion was revealed to us, something extraordinary, to this day I do not know if I have ever seen a house as beautiful as this one. It was a two-story house with lovely balconies and gables on the outside. Inside there were large halls and many rooms around them. A wonderful house. It was not simply empty, it was looted. The windows were broken, the handles, faucets, anything that could be taken away was looted."



Dayr al-Qassi village, 1949. "We must not forget that the families used to live in these houses", historian warns. Credit: Zoltan Kluger / National Library

Today, the house is not accessible to the public. It belongs to Nes Tziona's mental health center. In April, Giler managed to visit it with offsprings of its Arab owner, including his granddaughter who lives in Haifa and his great-granddaughter from East Jerusalem. "I took a picture of them sitting on the stairs. We chatted via WhatsApp with another grandson and granddaughter in Aman. It is a wonderful family," he recounts.

Posh neighborhood for Christian Palestinians

In recent years, Jewish entrepreneurs have rebuilt some Arab mansions. The two outstanding examples are the Fauzi Azar House in Nazareth, that is now an Abraham Hostel hotel; and Acre's Shukri house, currently the Effendi Hotel, owned by Uri Jeremias (Uri Buri). Though these projects are [examples of Jewish-Arab cooperation](#), intended to promote coexistence, both have been embroiled in tragic conflict-related stories.

Entrepreneur Maoz Inon stumbled upon the house while walking around the old city of Nazareth. He talked Azar's family into reviving his house and turning it into a hotel. The house, built in 1830, has stone-arched windows and high, hand-painted ceilings. The hotel manager is the owner's granddaughter Suraida Shomar-Nasser. On October 7, Inon's parents, Yaakov and Bilha, were murdered in the Netiv Ha'asara massacre, and the Nazareth hotel is currently closed, due to the security situation. The Acre hotel was set ablaze by Arabs in the 2021 riots, and one of the guests, Israel Defense Prize laureate military scientist Aby Har Even, was murdered.

The history of Villa Salameh, in Jerusalem's Talbiya neighborhood, is also symbolic of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Constantine Salameh, a Beirut native, purchased land in Talbiya from the Greek Orthodox church after World War I. He dreamed of building a luxurious neighborhood there for Christian Palestinians. He instructed French architect Marcel Favier to "create an abode of unprecedented splendor in this land."



Wall paintings from Majid Al-Sadeq house. 'There is a wealth of colors and styles,' our guide says. Credit: Gateway to Israel



Wall painting in Mejid Al-Sadek house. 'The ceiling looks like a carpet,' the guide says. Credit: Yoav Avneyon

Architect David Kroyanker wrote of an "unusually formal representative front" of the villa. This is how journalist and

director Dalia Karpel described it in a 2003 article: "The entrance of Villa Salameh leads to a double-height central hall, in the center of which there's a marble octagonal fountain, from which other rooms branch off. On one side of the large hall there's a wood-paneled dining room and salon, or living room, next to it.

"A service elevator connects the dining room to the basement, which contained a kitchen, wine cellar, laundry room, servants' quarters, storerooms and a two-car garage. Internal elevator connects the ground floor with the two upper floors. Each of bedroom has its own bathroom, in Italian marble. Door handles, accoutrements and the decorations, including lamps and wooden furniture, are all in art deco style."

Breaking news and the best of Haaretz straight to your inbox

Email *

danaty@hotmail.com

Sign Up

Please enter a valid email address



The dining room at Villa Salameh in Jerusalem. The owner ordered the French architect Marcel Favier "to create an abode of unprecedented splendor." Credit: Alex Levac

During Israel's War of Independence, Salameh's family left the house, later renting it to new residents – the government of

Belgium, that housed its consul there. The consul's secretary was Esther Mileikowsky, married to Saadya Mileikowsky, an uncle of Benhamin Netanyahu. Esther sent Salameh's personal belongings, carpets and silverware that were kept in the house to his new home in Beirut. The villa was then involved in a cross-continent lawsuit, and Salameh's family received partial compensation from the State of Israel. Purchased later by businessman David Soffer, it is still rented out to the Belgian consul.

Despite this complicated legal story, the villa was diligently attended to, which allowed it to preserve its beauty. Avneyon calls on authorities to handle other buildings in the same manner, to prevent these cultural artefacts from decay. "The layers of this land are complex and multicolor, and must not be covered by the sands of oblivion," he warns.

Click the alert icon to follow topics:

 Israel archaeology  Arab Israelis  Arab Israeli conflict  Palestinians

Comments

Name

Enter the commenter display name

Comment

By adding a comment, I agree to this site's [Terms of use](#)

Send

Sort comment by

Newest first

