

Al-Nabi Samwil

Introduction

Al-Nabi Samwil mountain is among the highest peaks in Jerusalem. From the rooftop of the mosque atop the mountain, one can view the neighboring Jerusalem villages, peripheries of Ramallah and the coast. Across the eras, its geographic location has made it a militarily strategic location, as it overlooks and dominates one of the main roads connecting the coast to Jerusalem.



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Location and Area

Northwest of the occupied City of Jerusalem, on the peak of al-Nabi Samwil, sits a village carrying the same name. It is situated eight kilometers from the old city and 885 meters above sea level.¹ Al-Nabi Samwil is bordered by the following villages: al-Jib from and Beit Iksa from the north, Beit Hanina from the east and Biddu and Beit Surik from the west. The village encompasses around 2,150 dunums² of land, categorized as Area C following the Oslo Agreement.

Origin and History

Though the village has been known by many names over millennia, all of them hint at the village's association with the Prophet Samuel. Some of these names include: Qaber Shamuel (Samuel's Tomb), Deir Shamuel (Samuel Monastery), and Mar Samuel (Saint Samuel). In his book *Biladuna Filasteen (Palestine, Our Homeland)*, Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh quotes some of what has been written in geography and history books about the village concerning the different names it has carried over time. Al-Dabbagh includes quotes from *al-Uns al-Jalil bi Tarikh al-Quds wa al-Khalil (The Glorious History of Jerusalem and Hebron)* by Moujir al-Din al-Hanbaly: "Shamuel's Tomb: his Tomb lies on the northern side outside Jerusalem, along the open road to Ramleh, Palestine, and atop a prominent mountain there. The Jews call the village Ramah."³ The village is also mentioned in a book titled *ahsan al-taqasim...* (The Best Divisions...) by Shams al-Din al-Maqdisi under the name Deir Shamuel. Yaqout al-Hamawy, who authored *Mo'jam al-Boldan (The Glossary of Countries)* references it under the name Mar Samuel.

Population

The number of Palestinian residents of al-Nabi Samwil village has fluctuated given the wars and attacks that the land of Palestine has witnessed. Their number, following the 1948 War and the ferocious battle that the village witnessed, was 168 persons only. Other sources suggest that the number of residents was higher, about 1,000 before the 1967 war. In 1982, that is, after the 1967 occupation of the village, its population was 66.⁴

¹ "Al-Nabi Samwil," Palestine Remembered, based on Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh's *Biladuna Filasteen (Palestine, Our Homeland)*, accessed January 7, 2018, [al-Nabi Samwil - القدس - فلسطين في الذاكرة](#)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

According to the villagers and the Village Council, the population of al-Nabi Samwil today is estimated to be around 250 people.⁵ They carry Palestinian Authority-issued identity cards and live in 15 residential units.⁶ The villagers say that 17 families, about 100 people, left the village after the al-Aqsa (second) Intifada in 2000.⁷ Most of those who have left the village over the last two decades have moved to neighboring Jerusalem villages that are larger and have better infrastructure, such as Biddu, al-Jib and Bir Nabala. The people of al-Nabi Samwil belong to five main families: Barakat, al-Abed, Abd al-Latif, Kasawnah and Obeid.⁸

Social and Economic Context

Historically, economic activity in al-Nabi Samwil depended primarily on agriculture. Like other Jerusalem village farmers, the people of al-Nabi Samwil cultivated crops that made for their main source of subsistence. They cultivated grains and legumes such as wheat, barley, lentil and Palestine vetch, in addition to olives, grapes and stone fruits.⁹

The village was known for its many natural springs, including al-Bass, al-Balad near the village mosque, and Amir spring, which the residents depended on as the main source of water. The village homes and adjacent *hoashs* (courtyards) were located in the heart of the village and its old center on an area of five donums near al-Nabi Samwil mosque and shrine. That was before their demolition in 1971 (more details to follow).

⁵ The villagers approximate the population at 200-300 people. The estimate was relayed in a conversation with Nawal Barakat, Director of the Women's Center in Al-Nabi Samwil.

⁶ "Al-Nabi Samwil Village Guide", Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), accessed January 10, 2017, [النبي صموئيل قرية دليل](#)

⁷ "Al-Nabi Samwil"

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ According to Mr. Eid Barakat from al-Nabi Samwil Village during a phone call conducted with him on October 19, 2020.



In addition to availing of the local springs, each family dug its own well; and Sayyah well, near al-Nabi Samwil mosque and shrine, was shared between all families. Like most Palestinian villages, al-Nabi Samwil had guest halls for hosting the residents' social occasions, the most famous of which were the Obeid and Barakat families' guest halls.

Landmarks

Al-Nabi Samwil Mosque and Shrine

The First Crusade occupied al-Nabi Samwil as the campaign made its way to Jerusalem in 1099. They dubbed the mountain "Mountain of Joy" (*Mont joie* in French),¹⁰ as it enabled them to glimpse the city of Jerusalem for the first time. They built a castle there, remnants of which are extant and whose stones are believed by some to have been used to build the village mosque and shrine. In the vicinity of the shrine, there is also a trench and a spacious yard. It is believed

¹⁰ Another narrative suggests that Christian pilgrims heading for Jerusalem named it.

that the stones to build the castle were extracted and cut there, leaving behind a trench and a spacious recessed yard.¹¹

Decades on, in 1187, Salah al-Din liberated the village from the Crusaders and converted the castle into a mosque, as he did with many Crusader castles in Palestine so as to impede the return of the Crusaders. Muslim presence in the village, however, dates back further than the Ayyubid period, with relics found in the village indicating the existence of pottery factories from the Umayyad period.¹² The mosque was partially destroyed during World War I and was restored by the Higher Islamic Council during British colonial rule.

In the center of the mosque lies a shrine and tomb that is believed to be of the Prophet Samuel, Israel's last judge according to Jewish tradition. As such, religious colonists frequent a synagogue that lies below the mosque, and the villagers conduct their five prayers in the mosque, which is run today by the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Awqaf. Israeli claims attempt to link the site with the Biblical village of Ramah, and in some cases, with Mitzpeh. Anthropological research, however, has never presented any evidence to that effect.

Visitors of the mosque and its surrounding archaeological site are greeted by the Occupation's Nature and Parks Authority¹³ banners and are presented with brochures about the site. Aside from information on the mosque and the history of its construction, the brochures neither discuss the Arab and Islamic history of the area nor mention the native people who were uprooted from their village and whose homes were razed to the ground.

¹¹ Tearosh, Eran. "From Plain to Hills and the Battle of Nabi Samwil" In *World War I in Palestine: The Battles in the Foothill of Jerusalem*, 2011.

¹² This information was presented during a guided historical tour of al-Nabi Samwil with Khaled Odeh in January 2018.

¹³ The Nature and Parks Authority is a body within the Occupation's Ministry of Environmental Protection and is responsible for managing and overseeing matters related to "national parks" and "nature reserves" on occupied Palestinian land. It is frequently involved in the seizure of Palestinians' land and property and their declaration as "nature reserves," in the interest of furthering the agenda of colonial expansion, which threatens Palestinian presence and urban development.



The Village Cemetery

Beside the mosque is a small Islamic cemetery surrounded by barbed wire, beyond which is a sign that reads “Martyrs of the Jordanian Armed Forces,” an homage to those who fell in defense of that land during the 1967 War.

History of Resistance

Due to its high altitude and strategic location on the road between the coast and Jerusalem, al-Nabi Samwil has witnessed many battles. The myriad colonialist invaders that Palestine has endured have always sought to control it. As the colonial powers plotted the division of our lands in World War I, this area witnessed a fierce battle between the Ottoman and British armies. The battle of al-Nabi Samwil lasted 12 days and culminated in its occupation by the British on November 21, 1917. For the British military, the battle over al-Nabi Samwil marked a

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shift from flat terrain warfare on the coastal plain of Palestine, to the more difficult mountain battles required for the occupation of Jerusalem.

After the British occupation of al-Nabi Samwil, the road to the peak of Tal al-Foul in Beit Hanina was opened, and from there, the road leading to the city of Jerusalem, which the British occupying army entered in December 1917. Perhaps the symbolic significance of al-Nabi Samwil, a major obstacle to overcome for those heading from the coast of Palestine to Jerusalem, led the British 75th Division to adopt the image of a key as its insignia, a reminder that control of the mountain peak had been key to their occupation of Jerusalem.¹⁴

During the long-pitched battle, many parts of the mosque and the shrine in al-Nabi Samwil were destroyed. Years later, the Islamic Council oversaw the reconstruction and renovation of the mosque as is indicated on a plaque at the entrance of the mosque.

Al-Nabi Samwil and the 1948 Nakba

The strategic military value of al-Nabi Samwil continued to prove pivotal in the years that followed. During the battles of the 1948 war, the Zionist militias launched Operation Yevusi, whose goal was to occupy strategic locations in the Jerusalem area that would open the way to neighboring areas, and to ensure control over locations from which the British had planned to withdraw. The list of targeted areas included al-Qatamon in the west of Jerusalem, al-Sheikh Jarrah in its center, and al-Nabi Samwil in its north. By seizing control of al-Sheikh Jarrah, the road to Jabal al-Masharef (Mount Scopus) and the Hebrew University would be secured. Seizing al-Nabi Samwil would facilitate the control of northern Jerusalem and the road to Qalandia Airport and adjacent colonies like Atarot.

Between April 22 and 23, 1948, the Zionist Palmach militias launched an assault on the village. Despite having scored relative success in gaining control over neighboring Beit Iksa and Shuafat, they failed to subdue al-Nabi Samwil, which was defended by resistance fighters from al-Jihad al-Muqaddas (Army of the Holy War) as well as volunteers from nearby villages and the Ajnadin Battalion of the Arab Liberation Army.

¹⁴ Tearosh, Eran. "From Plain to Hills and the Battle of Nabi Samwil" In *World War I in Palestine: The Battles in the Foothill of Jerusalem*, 2011.

According to a Zionist narrative, the battalion that was assigned the task of occupying al-Nabi Samwil was delayed due to obstacles it had encountered on the way through Beit Ikse. The battalion arrived by dawn amid thick fog, which made for a weak position against the Palestinian and Arab fighters garrisoned in the mosque and shrine. It is said that a military convoy on its way through Biddu to assist the first battalion had been attacked by resistance fighters and thus prevented from reaching al-Nabi Samwil. It is worth noting that there is a debate among Zionist military historians about the truth of what happened in al-Nabi Samwil, especially regarding ultimate responsibility for the defeat.¹⁵

The failure of the Zionist assault on al-Nabi Samwil meant that northern Jerusalem had been secured and spared from occupation. Following that failure, Zionist forces withdrew from Shuafat, Beit Surik and Biddu. According to Zionist sources, 38 Zionist combatants were killed in the battle of al-Nabi Samwil. According to Arab accounts, 19 Palestinian and Arab resistance fighters were martyred.¹⁶

Al-Nabi Samwil endured the battles of 1948 and remained under Jordanian rule until the 1967 war. It was situated on the frontline, that is, in close proximity to the so-called Armistice line that divided the Palestinian lands occupied in 1948 and what remained of Palestine in the West Bank. As it was a frontline village in an elevated and strategic location, a Jordanian surveillance and defense position was established there.

Among the prominent residents of al-Nabi Samwil was the resistance fighter Mustafa Obeid al-Samwily (1925–1956) who between 1949 and 1956 regularly crossed into the lands occupied in 1948, an act referred to as “infiltration” in Zionist literature. Al-Samwily would target Zionist colonists and soldiers on those stolen lands and return with as much as he could carry of their possessions. During those seven years, al-Samwily killed 21 Zionist colonists and soldiers and seized livestock, poultry, money and other items, making him a prime target for Occupation forces in the early 1950s.¹⁷

According to an article by journalist Hanadi Qawasmi: “al-Samwily was daring and skilled at infiltration. He would avoid it on moonlit nights and carry forth on the most difficult ones, long

¹⁵ For more information, refer to: Milstein, Uri. **אורי מילשטיין, "קרב נבי סמואל: הכתובת על הקיר שלא נקראה"**, (The Battle of al-Nabi Samwil: The Writing that Was Not Read on the Wall), 2009.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Qawasmi, Hanadi, “Sab’ al-Leil: Mostafa Ebeid al- Samwily”, Bab al-Wad. Last modified April 8, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2SN19gl>

winter nights with pouring rain. His son, Badr al-Din describes his father's sharp piercing vision, about which he has heard, saying: 'he could see at night just as well as he could in daytime, and he was fearless.'" Al-Samwily was also described in one newspaper as being "cunning like a fox and strong as a tiger." His feats in the country were described as "semi-military," and they eluded Zionist forces' attempts to capture him. "All attempts to ambush and arrest him failed. He made a mockery of all those who pursued him, and the stories of his feats spread throughout the West Bank. Al-Samwily became somewhat of a Palestinian Robin Hood."¹⁸

Al-Nabi Samwil after Occupation

Following the Israeli occupation of al-Nabi Samwil in 1967, and despite it being a Jerusalem village with a strategic geographic location, the Occupation authorities did not include it under their municipal jurisdiction in Jerusalem. In contrast with the neighboring areas that were annexed, the village remained outside the boundaries of the Occupation Municipality in Jerusalem.

This, however, was likely the result of a miscalculation. In a correspondence between an Israeli minister and Golda Meir, then the Occupation's prime minister, the former stated that a mistake had been made on June 26, 1967 when the village of al-Nabi Samwil was excluded from the areas annexed to Jerusalem, and that it would pose a serious political threat if it is not colonized.¹⁹

In what appeared to be a "correction" of this mistake, Occupation forces raided al-Nabi Samwil on March 22, 1972, destroying 52 houses belonging to 11 families of close to 200 members. These were the old historic houses that the families of the village had inherited generation after generation, and which had stood adjacent to the village mosque and shrine's western side. Nothing remains of the houses but some ruins and foundations, where the Occupation's Antiquities Authority began excavations in 1992.²⁰

The houses were demolished, and the villagers were displaced, yet they managed to stay close. East of the village mosque were some houses belonging to families that had been exiled to Jordan (mostly) during the 1967 war. The newly displaced families sought refuge in those houses

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Refer to Al-Haq Institute's Report, "Hidden in Plain Sight: The Village of Nabi Samwil", 2018, p.6, [NABI SAMWIL](#)

²⁰ Ibid. p.10.

and continue to live there to this day. It is rare to find a family from al-Nabi Samwil that owns the house in which it resides. In most cases, the house belongs to a relative or neighbor. With that, the Occupation authorities had transferred the village residents from the vicinity of the mosque and archeological site on the peak of the mountain to neighboring lands. Subsequently, the process of land seizure would continue, with the aim of bolstering colonization.

In its report on the village, the Palestinian organization, al-Haq, notes that the UN offices archives and the Red Cross in Jerusalem document a history of the Occupation authorities targeting the village, beginning directly after the 1967 war. The archives chronicle raids on the village, land seizures and attacks by colonists. No effort was spared to expel its residents. According to the report, most official Israeli communications at the ministerial level confirm the importance lent to the seizure and colonization of al-Nabi Samwil, given its proximity to the city and being among the highest peaks in Jerusalem.²¹ The reality of the village today reflects the continuation of Israeli policies that seek to displace Palestinians and seize their land, though the means and tools to do so may be innovative, as will be detailed later.

Colonization

“National Parks”

A Israeli so-called “national park” was partially declared on the lands of al-Nabi Samwil village in 1995. The boundaries of the “park” include the mosque and archeological site, the village homes, the surrounding agricultural fields and neighboring plots, exceeding the original area of the village at nearly 3,500 donums.²² While the area includes the land on which the villagers reside today, in addition to their nearby fields, it deliberately excludes the land on which the colonies were built to ensure the continuation of their construction and expansion.

The Occupation authorities declare “national parks” in areas they claim contain significant archaeological finds or important natural landmarks. Yet, aside from the archeological site near the mosque (destroyed in 1972), there are no distinct natural or archeological features in the area. In the case of al-Nabi Samwil, the pretext for the declaration of the “national park” is

²¹ Ibid.

²² Some of this land belongs to Beit Hanina.

based on the archaeological site that does exist in the vicinity of the mosque and shrine, in addition to the shrine of the Prophet Samuel itself, a religious site frequented by Jewish worshippers. It is a mere pretext of course, the real motivation being the desire to gain control of more land with the least possible number of Palestinian inhabitants, who in turn are prevented from building and expanding.²³

Designating a place as a “national park” means it falls under the jurisdiction and policies of the Occupation’s Nature and Parks Authority and is thus managed as one of its “properties.” According to egregious Israeli law, such areas are subject to strict restrictions over construction, land fencing and cultivation. In practice, two factors stifle the people of al-Nabi Samwil’s construction, expansion and struggle for survival: on the one hand, their land is categorized as Area C, and therefore, they are not issued construction permits by the Occupation’s Civil Administration, as is the case with all Area C land in the West Bank; on the other hand, their land falls within the boundaries of the “national park,” which only exacerbates the restrictions.²⁴

For al-Nabi Samwil, it does not end with the Oslo Agreement and division of the land, or with the declaration of a “national park” on village land. After the second Intifada, the people of al-Nabi Samwil were faced with a new reality and yet more restrictions. The village was besieged and severed from the occupied city of Jerusalem and its northwestern villages; the culprit is the Wall and the Occupation’s military checkpoints.

The Annexation and Expansion Wall

The Annexation and Expansion Wall was built in al-Nabi Samwil in 2005, isolating around 2,260 donums of its land. The village, which lies on West Bank land, and whose people carry Palestinian identity cards, fell within the Annexation and Expansion Wall, that is, on the side controlled directly by the Occupation. The Wall did not separate it from Jerusalem, but, rather, it severed it from its natural contiguity with the West Bank, especially with Ramallah and its neighboring villages. The Wall placed al-Nabi Samwil within the Giv’at Ze’ev colonial bloc.²⁵

²³ Read more: Qawasmi, Hanadi, “National Parks: Colonization in the name of Nature,” Mitras. Last modified October 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3aNYLB3>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “Al-Nabi Samwil Village Guide,” Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem (ARI), [النبي صمونيل قرية دليل](#)

The Wall has left carriers of the Palestinian identity card who live on what is technically Palestinian Authority land (albeit Area C) isolated from areas to which they were always inexorably linked, namely the northwestern Jerusalem villages. A military checkpoint was erected, which the villagers are forced to traverse daily on their way to and from work, school and university.

Al-Jib Military Checkpoint

The villagers are forced to traverse al-Jib military checkpoint to arrive at their village or to leave it heading towards Ramallah. A carrier of the (green) Palestinian identity card is not allowed through unless they are a first degree relative and only after obtaining a permit issued by the Occupation authorities. On the other hand, anyone carrying a (blue) Israeli identity card can reach the village without having to pass through the al-Jib or any other military checkpoint. Despite there not being a checkpoint separating the village from occupied Jerusalem, the villagers are forbidden from traveling along any road that leads there. They are restricted to travelling on the road that leads to al-Jib military checkpoint, and from there, to Ramallah.

The Occupation army forces the people of al-Nabi Samwil to coordinate with their Village Council, which in turn coordinates with the Occupation's liaison, the "Civil Administration" in the Occupation army, to arrange for the entry of food supplies to the village through the checkpoint. In order to bring a gas cylinder home, you would first need to coordinate its entry through the checkpoint. The entry of building supplies to the village is also strictly forbidden, in line with the Occupation's agenda to displace the people of al-Nabi Samwil by stifling their everyday lives.²⁶

The people thus find themselves in an isolated enclave, cut off from their historical surroundings and their Palestinian contiguity and facing pressures and restrictions over construction and movement.²⁷

Colonies

A total of 467 donums of land were confiscated from al-Nabi Samwil for the establishment of two colonies: 331 donums for Har Shmuel colonial neighborhood, north of al-Nabi Samwil and

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

part of Giv'at Ze'ev colony established on al-Jib land in 1996; and 136 dunums for Neve Shmuel colony, built in 1996;²⁸ in addition to Route 436, a colonial bypass road that cuts through al-Nabi Samwil.

With the land confiscations that began after the 1967 war, the people of al-Nabi Samwil have been left with only about 1,050 dunums of their land.

Epilogue

After the signing of the Oslo Agreement, all the land in al-Nabi Samwil, a total of 2,150 dunums, was categorized as Area C, thereby forcing it under the Occupation's so-called Civil Administration and completely prohibiting Palestinians from constructing there. As such, since the 1990s, not a single new house has been built in the village. Many people have been forced to live in overcrowded residential units or to move to nearby villages, while others have attempted to renovate and make as much use of their houses as possible. The complete ban on construction has led to the demolition of building annexes or light structures that some had adjoined to their homes. The village today is home to only one school with a single classroom, which is in fact a repurposed mobile trailer, where students aged six to ten are taught. The construction of normal classrooms is futile, as they will certainly be demolished by the Israeli occupation.

²⁸ *Ibid.*