

ARCHAEOLOGISTS WITHOUT BORDERS

by [Jean-Olivier Gransard-Desmond](#)

— See you in Ramallah in two months. That will give you time to pack your bags and deal with the formalities, concluded Ghattas Jeries Sayej.

Clearly, the talk given by Alex and I didn't go unnoticed during that conference in Helsinki where we spoke a few months ago on the role of archaeologists in daily life. Entitled *Archeology, a political tool*, our communication caused a stir. Daring to suggest that the role of archaeologists was not only limited to understanding the events of the past, but that it should also contribute to the preparation of the future of our societies, was not to everyone's liking. One had to admit that the political consequences of this position were hardly felt by scientists sheltered from the chaos of the world in their ivory tower.

However, some of our colleagues had grasped the scientific and social merits and opportunities of these implications. This is how Ghattas Jeries Sayej of PACE, the Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange, contacted our laboratory to invite us to participate in a mission that was somewhat special for archaeologists. He presented us with the unvarnished framework: despite the armed conflict that had raged between Israelis and Palestinians since the 2000s, PACE needed personnel to supervise a study mission to the Al-Jib site, the former Biblical Gibeon, and to raise awareness among the inhabitants of their heritage. The reason for his approach was mainly the lack of interest of the local population in the ancient remains to the point that they used the ancient Canaanite water cisterns as trash cans. The picture seemed dire, but we weren't going to give up so quickly. This mission was a wonderful opportunity to put our theories into practice.

Two months later, visa in hand, Alex and I met up at Roissy Airport for this new adventure.

— Do you think we will be welcomed in Al-Jib? Alex asked me.

— I don't know, but I have my doubts, I replied. While it is true that the population uses ancient tanks as dumping grounds, I think we'll encounter the same problems as in France. I don't have to tell you about the difficulties we have every time we intervene with a farmer or a landowner.

— You're probably right, Lisa. Plus, as this is a heritage referring to Hebrew history in the middle of Palestinian territory, there's a good chance that we'll find even more resistance than in France.

As we took to the skies, these forebodings didn't dampen our hopes of securing the support of the people of Al-Jib.

In Ramallah, we were greeted by Ghattas who reminded us of the reasons for his choice. Professionals focused on the applications of archeology, we were mostly foreigners who would not be accused of Zionist proselytism. The Palestinians, like the Israelis, weren't short of agents. However, the current tensions didn't allow them to intervene. Moreover, this context did nothing to promote impartiality and made it hard to maintain scientific ethics. Finally, knowing how to popularize our science wasn't for everyone, which reduced the number of professionals who could act. With Alex, we met the three criteria: archaeologists, foreigners, popularizers.

Ghattas also told us what he wanted from the local population: not only to be interested in the history of the place, but also in its preservation and its development. These ancient

remains had a key role to play in the future of the city of Al-Jib. With tourism, they could become a source of economic development. As a place of gathering and history, the ancient cisterns would also represent an intergenerational center of attraction. This space would give new breath to public life. Obviously, THE condition was that the residents be able to see this cultural heritage as belonging to their own history. Ghattas again pointed out that this last goal was still far off:

— I wouldn't be surprised if you're insulted, even greeted by rock-throwing. Your first mission is therefore to be accepted by the population. As I mentioned to you, the place serves as a dumping ground, mainly because it is a testimony to Biblical history. It's up to you to find the words that will interest people in the protection and preservation of this magnificent testimony to human ingenuity in terms of water access.

— Alex doesn't speak Arabic and my accent isn't the best. Who will help us there in Al-Jib? I asked.

— You will be welcomed by the PACE team, led by Janette Shahid. Janette will provide you with an interpreter if needed. The idea, however, is that you train the PACE workers as a priority so that they become autonomous. You are not going to spend the rest of your lives in Al-Jib! Ghattas joked.

— Thank you for these details, Alex said with his usual cheerful tone. Lisa, I think we're not going to run out of surprises in the coming months, he added with a half-smile.

— Such a mission will surely take us at least six months, I said, already feeling the weight of the tensions to come. But no problem! That works for me.

— I don't want to spoil your enthusiasm, Ghattas said, but just imagine if you can't do it. You are not the first archaeologists to intervene in Al-Jib, though you'll be the first foreign professionals. Your predecessors failed. You are our last chance.

Alex and I exchanged a glance. The task might be much more complex than we initially imagined. Still, it was an opportunity to test our hypotheses in terms of federating a reluctant population through the idea of considering the past as a lever for the future. We should have time to act diplomatically during the site survey. Seeing places of interest to foreigners might make them change their minds.

The next day, after a hearty breakfast and the final material preparations for the study of the remains, we got to Al-Jib in the late morning. As soon as we arrived, the many heavy stares proved to us that Ghattas hadn't exaggerated about the difficulties that lay ahead. The people in charge of the local heritage, themselves, greeted us with suspicious looks. We decided to go straight to the cisterns to take stock of the study work and decompress in the middle of our favorite environment. We weren't disappointed: plastic bottles, shattered trash bags, dead animals and so on, filled the cisterns that threatened to collapse at any moment. The cleaning and clearing work had already started, but there were not enough of us. However, I didn't feel like starting to set up awareness groups just then.

In this environment, which reassured me in spite of its current state, I asked Alex to come with me to set up the equipment we needed for the archaeological survey. As we began, shouts from the teenagers reached us — *هذا ليس وطنك اذهب حيث جئت* Go home, les *kuffār*! No Westerners here! — they continued in English.

As the situation worsened, we were forced to leave the area and retreat to the PACE site, an old school adapted for the needs of the teams. This start was hardly encouraging. The following days were no different.

Days passed, then weeks. Despite the establishment of groups to raise awareness of local cultural heritage in order to explain its interest in the city and its unifying potential for the inhabitants, nothing helped, and we didn't make progress. The hostility towards us, and even towards PACE, surprised me. We had been there for almost six months. Our clean-ups

were useless because they were immediately destroyed by new deposits. You would think it was a game!

I was completely demoralized. I expected the work to be hard, but I was hopeful that the participation of Palestinian archaeologists and local citizens would facilitate exchanges. But how can these exchanges be facilitated when people are suspicious of their own fellow citizens on the pretext that they are mingling with the enemy, or more precisely, with *kuffār*, disbelievers? Another day for nothing!

I returned to what was "my home" for a few more months. Tonight, I was going to again take this little path through the typical narrow streets of the area. It had become a habit. I enjoyed buying chicken shawarmas there to share with Yasser. A funny character, this Yasser! He spoke little, but seemed very cultured. Everyone knew him and often gave him something to eat. I enjoyed chatting with him after my tough days.

— *Assalamu alaykum* Yasser, I said, handing one of my chawarmas to the old man.

— *Wa alaykum assalam*, Lisa. What good wind do you bring today ? he asked.

— The wind of frustration, maybe, I answered glumly.

— It's a hard country. A *kāfir* has to understand that. Haven't you studied the history of our country?

— Of course, Yasser! I understand the tensions, or to put it better, the millennial hatreds that hamper our mission today. What I don't understand is how a population would rather get bogged down in this hatred than move forward by improving its living conditions.

— Hum! Hum! he said, savoring the hot meat which exhaled its aroma in fine vapor in the freshness of the early evening.

— These tanks are your whole story. It breaks my heart to see them fall apart.

— These are just old stones. They are no longer useful except to remind us of the presence of the Hebrews in these places and to justify the will of the Israelis to take back these lands. Better they fall into disrepair than to see them restored.

— Do you realize that if the tanks were usable and clean, a new economy could develop? Tourists would definitely come to see these wonders. In addition to economic matters, this is a wonderful place to teach history to children and to facilitate encounters between al-Jib elders, workers and young people. People of all groups could come together to chat and exchange, to enrich each other, as much to improve the welcome for tourists as for the knowledge of their own city. They could be proud of their heritage. Do you think that in France all of our cultural heritage comes from French culture alone?

— What do you mean Lisa? Of course your heritage is yours!

— Not at all, Yasser! That's maybe what some politicians who understand nothing would have us believe and build borders where, on the contrary, there are bridges. We've been occupied many times, in this territory that we call France today. We were invaded by the Greeks, by the Celts, by the Romans, by the Arabs, by Germanic peoples as much in medieval times as in the 20th century with the Nazis to name only the most famous invasions. Despite everything, we have never denied the cultural heritage that these cultures left us. Quite the contrary!

— Why would you want to help our people? You! A *kafir*! Maybe you want to show us once again that you Westerners know better than everyone else what is good for them?

— I understand that you react like this, Yasser, even if it hurts me. We have known each other for several months now and, like the rest of the population here, you think I came as a conqueror. Ultimately, this mission is going to be a big fiasco. Too bad, we have tried. Maybe we did it wrong from the start! I hope I will have the chance to meet you again in different circumstances.

— Your words sound like the truth. Maybe you should go see Janette to tell her about it?

— The local PACE manager? She knows very well why we are here. We work with their teams. Why should I go tell her what I just told you?

— Do it and tell him that Yasser sent you.

Taken aback, I left my friend and, taking advantage that it was still early in the evening, I went to PACE headquarters to see Janette. What a surprise to see this Palestinian woman opening her eyes wide at the mention of Yasser's name and my story! After listening to me attentively, Janette declared to me very seriously:

- Tomorrow, we will continue cleaning the tanks. We will have a lot of work.
- Like every day, Janette! I don't understand how tomorrow will be any different!
- You'll see! Janette cut off before going back to her work.

Having returned to the mission, I told Alex about my exchanges with Yasser and Janette. My friend looked very happy as he went to bed. Was it his usual expression that I misinterpreted, or did his Middle Eastern experience allow him to know something I didn't? All these mysterious behaviors kept me from sleeping. I didn't sleep all night: did it click? Who was Yasser for this city? Why hadn't Janette told me about him before? So many questions that haunted my mind into the wee hours of the morning.

That day, work resumed as usual at 6 am in order to keep cool. However, around 7:30 a.m., an influx of people of all ages gathered in the tank. Janette, speaking to them in Arabic, pointed to me several times. Then she asked me to repeat my story from the day before. We had already explained all this to them without any results. Why would it be any different today? I resumed my speech in Arabic just as Yasser arrived. It was the first time he had visited us at the cisterns.

Speaking after my speech, Yasser pointed out that he knew me well after interacting with me over the past few months. He mentioned that I had shared my bread with him without ever asking for anything in return. He concludes:

- This Western archaeologist is not here as a conqueror.
- She's a woman! replied a man in the crowd.
- So what? resumed Yasser. Janette Houry, who was mayor of Ramallah, was a woman as well! Was she a bad mayor? No. We can trust Lisa. Helping her is helping ourselves.

I couldn't believe my ears, let alone my eyes. For the first time in months, young, old and even working people were coming to register to participate in the upcoming clean-up days with PACE officials. I later learned that Yasser was a well-respected figure in the city. I never knew why, and he never told me when we met again for our daily evening meal.

A year had passed since our arrival. Ghattas was waiting for us in Ramallah before our return to France. He confided to us that he himself had ended up no longer believing. The outcome of the situation was thus an immense pleasure. He congratulated us on our intervention. He was truly delighted to see the work of PACE take off again in Al-Jib.

His words went straight to our hearts, but our greatest success came to us a few months later through an article in The Daily Star's Outlook Magazine: work was continuing in Al-Jib with the support of the people and tourists were arriving. Despite the conflict, people went to visit the cisterns of ancient Gibeon in Al-Jib because Palestinians of all ages and walks of life had succeeded in setting aside their grievances. Thanks to archaeologists, human beings had overcome their blockages, beyond the borders of time and space, beyond beliefs, to build a better and more enlightened society.

To go further

This work of fiction is based on facts reported by Ghattas Jerjes Sayej, "Can archaeologists intervene in public debate on urgent questions of a social, cultural or political nature? A reflection on the Israeli – Palestinian Archeology Working Group (IPAWG)", *Archaeological Dialogues* 20/1, June 2013, p. 47-58.

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