Street-naming, tourism development and cultural conflict: the case of the Old City of Acre/Akko/Akka

Noam Shoval

Extensive research has been conducted on place names because they are one of the most significant markers of the intimate relationship between people and territory. Several studies on street names have already noted the use of place names as a form of symbolic capital in order to create and sell place distinctions for the purposes of prestige and profit. The literature, however, has not yet adequately addressed a different motivation in place-naming: the promotion of places for the purpose of tourism development. Furthermore, research in this field has yet to examine the ways in which local residents interpret and contest official street names with their own oral system of naming, focusing instead on the process of selecting and affixing place names and the cultural conflicts that arise from these political decisions. This article explores place-naming in the Old City of Acre (Israel) in light of tourism development processes, focusing not only on the motivations for the naming but also on the responses of local residents to the naming and to the struggle on the symbolic identity of the city that develop as a result. The first section of the article examines the historical process of bestowing official street names in the Old City of Acre as well as the existing system of place names used by the local Arab inhabitants of the Old City. The article’s second section studies the reactions and attitudes of the local population in the Old City to the relatively recent initiative of the Acre Development Company to assign official street names, chosen in the past, to the streets and alleys of the Old City.

Key words tourist development; place-naming; street-naming; Acre; Akko; Akka

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Introduction

Street names serve largely to commemorate historical events, narratives or people. Thus they reflect a society’s accepted history, common past and geo-historical space (Alderman 2003; Bar-Gal 1988; Relph 1976; Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). Moreover, street names reflect a state’s hegemony and authority. In some instances, an explanation of the person or event for which a street is named is included on the sign, creating a renewed interpretation of history by the municipal authorities. Street names, then, create a certain historical narrative, generating a sense of permanence so that the past, as portrayed by the state, becomes the accepted history and heritage (Azaryahu 1996).

Different ethnic, cultural or political groups living in the city may wish to give the space names that are important to them. Continuity occurs as long as the hegemony of a dominant group is lasting in the city. If struggles for change are successful they can lead to the renaming of some street names or places. In contrast, ideological changes in society and – in extreme cases – military conquests and revolutions may result in changes in a high proportion of the street names, as was the case in cities such as Berlin (Azaryahu 1997), Bucharest (Light 2004) and Budapest (Palonen 2008). The use of street names for commemoration is a tool for changing the character of urban public space and transforms it, in essence, into a political arena (Alderman 2002; Azaryahu 2004; Azaryahu and Kook 2002; Entrikin 1991; Rose-Redwood 2008b; Rose-Redwood et al. 2010).

A perusal of a city map, then, employing a textual analysis and relating to the demographic, geographical and social significance of the street names, provides information about the history of the political changes that a given city has witnessed (Palonen 1993; Suttles 1984).

In her work on Irish place names, Nash (1999) mapped the various motives behind street-naming as follows: capitalist modernisation (Pred 1990), colonial settlement (Carter 1987), state formation (Cohen and Kliot 1992), national independence (Yeoh 1996) and
official commemoration (Azaryahu 1996). This article presents another motive for street-naming: a means to enable the orientation of visitors to a historic city and to enhance the tourist development and attraction of a destination. This motivation, first seen in Acre in the mid-1960s, has not yet been recorded explicitly in academic literature. The fact that there is little research in this field of tourism development and place-naming is evident in the recently published anthology – with selections of the very finest of contemporary academic literature on place-naming – edited by Berg and Vuolteenaho (2009); the subject is also absent from an up-to-date review paper published recently by Rose-Redwood et al. (2010).

At one point in time, street names in Acre were perceived as a form of symbolic capital intended to facilitate the accumulation of tourist revenue/financial capital. Several studies on street names have already noted the use of place names as a form of symbolic capital in order to create and sell place distinctions for the purposes of prestige and profit (Alderman 2008; Rose-Redwood 2008a 2008b; Rose-Redwood and Alderman 2011). However, the literature has not adequately addressed the involvement of naming in the promotion of place for tourism development purposes.

This article focuses also on the ways in which local residents interpret and contest the official street names with their own oral system of naming. It prompts us to consider how the form and meanings of place names are consumed. This differs from most place-name studies, which focus on the creation of place names, the naming process and the cultural conflicts that arise from these political decisions. Few studies examine the cultural conflicts arising between officials and locals long after the streets have been named. Exceptions are Yeoh’s (1992 1996) studies on Singapore, Raento and Watson’s (2000) study on the Basque town of Gernika/Guernica, Rose-Redwood’s (2008a) study of the renaming of Sixth Avenue, Myers’s (2009) study of Zanzibar, and Kearns and Berg’s (2009) study of place-name pronunciation.

The struggle over the genius loci of the Old City of Acre, or its ‘spirit’, ‘ethos’, ‘characteristic’ or ‘ideology’ as Bell and de-Shalit (2011) would term it, could also be conceptualised, in my view, using Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1991 1996) that has been developed in many directions by various writers in the last decade (Attoh 2011). Lefebvre’s right to the city was his political instrument for urban change, one that logically follows his theoretical framework as a Marxist urbanist (Merrifield 2002). Marxism argues that space is a social product that is produced like any other commodities, right to the city therefore argues for democratising development decisions by residents taking power over spatial production – in effect challenging conventional property rights and redistributive rights (Mitchell 2003; Purcell 2003). In the case to be presented in Acre there is a struggle for the meaning of space in the Old City between the Acre Development Company (ADC), which is an Israeli governmental agency that develops Acre for tourists, and the local predominantly Muslim population that reside in this space. I suggest that this case study could be used to demonstrate a possible expansion of the concept of the right to the city, at least from a Marxist humanistic point of view, moving from the more tangible – materialistic city space which is the usual arena for the right to the city theoretical and practical implementations – toward the conceptualisation of the right to the city regarding the struggle on intangible aspects of the city, such as symbolic values or the city’s spirit. In the vast literature that originated from Lefebvre’s original concept, so far there has not been such a proposal to extend the concept to the intangible dimensions of the struggles in the city (Attoh 2011).

In many post-colonial states, commemoration through the use of street names served as a key element of nation-building in the mid-twentieth century. The case of Israel has been investigated by a relatively large number of researchers; this is a result of frequent geopolitical changes in the region, which led to different phases of street-naming under various political and cultural regimes. The main periods that have been investigated are the British Mandate period (Azaryahu 2004; Bar-Gal 1988; Katz 1995), the formative years of the State of Israel (Azaryahu and Golan 2001) and modern-day Israel (Azaryahu 2012; Azaryahu and Kook 2002; Pinchevski and Torgovnik 2002).

The vast majority of past studies of place-naming in the context of Israel focus on issues of commemoration based on motivations of nationalism and state formation rather than tourism, therefore this article contributes also to advance our understanding of the toponymic landscape of Israel.

Acre: a history

Acre is a city with many names. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the original Semitic name was changed to Ptolemais. The Crusaders called it Acre or St. Jean d’Acre (Makhoul and Johns 1946). Today, the names of the city are Akko in Hebrew, Akka in Arabic and Acre in English.

In this article I adopt the English form of the name of the city, Acre. In my view, Acre is currently the most ‘neutral’ of the modern names of the city, though it too is obviously not entirely neutral. However, due to the fact that the British Mandate for Palestine ended more than 64 years ago and due to the fact that currently the struggles about place names in the city are between the Israeli, primarily Jewish administration and the Israeli…
Arab/Palestinian residents of the city, using the English name is the least contested version of the city’s name.

Nestled along the Mediterranean shore (Figure 1), Acre has been continuously inhabited for the last four millennia and is therefore today one of the oldest continuously inhabited towns in the world. At present, 25 per cent of the city’s 45 000 residents are of Arab origin; most of them are still concentrated in the Old City, which is inhabited by about 8000 residents. For years, the Old City has been considered one of the densest and poorest boroughs in Israel (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics 2011). Despite its social and economic problems, Acre’s Old City is most famous today for its extraordinarily well-preserved underground Crusader city; it also boasts numerous other important archaeological sites, as well as a working fishermen’s wharf and a typical Middle Eastern market (souk).

Acre is surprisingly uncharged in terms of religious conflicts between the Holy Land’s three monotheistic religions. This is due to the fact that the city is not a sacred area or a focus of pilgrimage for any of the three religions. However, it ‘compensates’ for this by being the holiest place on earth for the Baha’i religion; the founder of the faith, Baha’u’llah, was imprisoned in the fortress of Acre by the Ottomans in 1868 and later confined to the city and its environs. Baha’u’llah died in 1892 and was buried on the grounds of his mansion house (Bahji Palace) in the vicinity of Acre, which is considered the holiest spot in the world for Baha’is (Cohen 1972).

As a result of the United Nations’ decision of 29 November 1947 to divide the land under the British Mandate jurisdiction into two states, Acre was slated for inclusion in the planned Palestinian state; however, during the war of 1948 it became a part of Israel. As a result, thousands of Jewish refugees from Europe and Arab countries settled in the city, changing Acre’s demographic by creating a solid Jewish majority. A large proportion of the Arab population that remained in the city and in neighbouring settlements was concentrated by the Israeli authorities in the Old City, in which they formed the majority of the population.

In 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added Acre’s Old City to its list of World Heritage sites. Recognising its potential for tourism, the State of Israel has been trying for decades to develop the city as a destination for cultural tourism; however, at present the Old City’s inhabitants are primarily Muslim Arabs. As a result, tourist development is a complex and politically charged process: a dominantly Jewish state developing an Arab-Muslim locality with abundant Crusader-Christian heritage to market it to visitors who are usually either from Christian or Jewish backgrounds.

Other than a youth hostel and two small boutique hotels, Acre’s Old City does not offer any tourist accommodation. As a result, most visitors in the town rarely stay the night, choosing to spend a few hours touring the sites instead. Thus most of the visitors to Acre can be considered ‘day trippers’ rather than ‘tourists’. Data regarding the level of visitation to the city are non-existent, which is not unusual in urban tourism (Mazanec 1997); however, the ADC states that roughly 250 000 visitors annually came to the underground Crusader City (‘Crusader Halls’) – the city’s main paid attraction – between the years 2006 and 2011.

Figure 1 Location map of Acre within Israel
Within the tourism development process in the Old City, the ADC began to mark the streets and alleys of the Old City with plaques containing names from the city’s ‘history’ in 2002 (Plate 1). Decisions on the specific names had been made in the 1950s and 1960s by the municipality’s street-naming committee. No part of this process involved consultation with the Arab residents of the Old City – an ethnic and religious minority within the municipality of Acre since 1948 that today constitutes the sole demographic in the Old City.

The local residents maintain an unofficial oral system of names for the different quarters, streets and squares. This oral system was not challenged by the previous street signs, introduced during the British Mandate period (1917–1948), since the Mandate system, similar to that of many other historical cities (e.g. Venice, Nazareth, etc.), was based on numbers rather on names (Plate 2 and Figure 2). As a result, there are currently three parallel street-name structures:

1. An official system that appears on tourist maps, created by the different street-name committees of the Municipality of Acre.
2. A system based on numbers, introduced during British rule of the region.
3. The unofficial, oral, set of place names used by the local population.

The new cultural space – in the form of street signs using names that are, for all intents and purposes, alien to the local population – was forced upon residents of the Old City, resulting in antagonism and anger, and in some cases in locals defacing the street signs. In addition, as a counter-measure, the local branch of the Islamic movement has begun to put up many green plaques with verses from different Muslim Holy Scriptures (Plate 3). This form of spatial resistance is another step in the on-going struggle for symbolic control of the physical space of the Old City of Acre: a space in which local inhabitants conduct their daily affairs and that, simultaneously, has become a destination for mass tourist consumption.

Methods

Using archival material and in-depth interviews, the majority of which took place in 2005, this article analyses the street-naming processes that have taken place in the Old City of Acre in the last five decades. Furthermore, the article evaluates the reactions of the residents to the intensification of this process in recent years, when authorities began to display new street names on signage.

To gain an understanding of how the tourist space in Acre was defined, I examined the Acre Street-Naming Committee’s records in the relevant years, in an effort to comprehend the concept behind the names given to the streets and the historical narrative that guided those involved in naming the streets. The local Arab residents’ perception of ancient Acre’s tourism space was studied using 40 questionnaires circulated randomly among the city’s residents at key geographic points in the city, examining the local population’s attitudes to existing street names as they appear on street signs and tourist maps.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with merchants at different points around the city, as they constitute a group that benefits directly from tourism. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with various people in Acre, including intellectuals, educators and community leaders, and representatives of the municipality and the ADC. The names of three interviewees were discarded in order to protect their identity upon their requests. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew – a language that Arab intellectuals, merchants, educators and leaders in Israel are

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Plate 1  A new street sign placed by the Acre Development Company

Plate 2  Division of the Old City of Acre into administrative areas during the British Mandate period (1917–1948)
fluent in – by the author of this article and a research assistant.

Official street-naming in Acre

Street names in the Old City of Acre comprise a combination of numerous layers of history, commemoration and politics. To understand the local residents’ view of the situation, and thus understand their attitude toward tourism development, examination is needed of how the city’s streets were named.

Pre-1948

The detailed maps produced by the British administration during their rule in the region (1917–1948) reveal that only two streets in the Old City of Acre during the period had names: Al Jazzar, for the Ottoman ruler of Acre and the Galilee during the period 1775–1804, and Salah a Din, the founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty and the leader of the opposition to the Crusaders in the Levant at the end of the twelfth century. During this period, Acre was a predominantly Arab city; therefore it is not surprising that these two names are of Muslim historical leaders who are connected to the history of the city and the region. Guidebooks and other materials from this period do not offer any additional information regarding street names.

Aside from the two streets with names, the Old City was divided into six blocks by the British administration; each housing unit received a number (see Plate 2 and Figure 2). This method is still in use by the Israeli Postal Authority, as will be described later in this article. Records from other Arab cities suggest that the British rulers faced difficulties in convincing the local Arab population of the need for naming the streets; in

Figure 2 Street- and house-numbering system in the Old City of Acre introduced during the British Mandate period (1917–1948)

Plate 3 A plaque put up by the Islamic movement. The translation of the inscription is ‘Remember Allah’. Below is one of the signs put up by the Acre Development Company as part of the ‘Jewish Trail’
order to create administrative efficiency and as a measure of governmentality (Rose-Redwood 2008c), they chose to number the streets instead (Pinchevski and Torgovnik 2002). In the Old City of Nazareth, similarly, the British gave the streets and alleys numbers rather than names, and this system still functions with no change nearly 60 years after the last British administrator left the country.

1949–1964
The newly established State of Israel wished to secure its dominance in areas that were conquered during the war, especially in cities that were formerly predominantly Arab. One of the chosen methods was naming or, when necessary, renaming streets, changing Arab names to ones that related to the State of Israel, Jewish history or the Zionist movement (Azaryahu 2004). One example of the battle over symbolic space in Acre is given by Torstrick, who describes how the municipal emblem of Acre – designed for a local competition held in 1949 – figured in the Israeli effort to rework the city’s history (Torstrick 2000). In this case, the immediate past was forgotten in favour of a more distant past. The winning design was a shield divided into four quadrants. Each quadrant contained an image: a Phoenician sailing ship, a factory symbol, a stylised modern building with palm trees and a wall with battlements. The emblem unites the modern (factories and apartments) with the ancient (the Phoenicians and the Crusaders). Acre’s Arab history and heritage has no place in this depiction (Torstrick 2000).

The initial decision to give official names to the streets in Acre’s Old City, which, apart from the two street names described earlier, had previously been known only by numbers, was made on 27 January 1952, when the municipality’s Street-Naming Committee gave names to four streets in the Old City. The city’s Jewish religious leader, Rabbi Yashar, recommended Nikanor Gate and Yehonatan the Hasmonean, and Mayor Baruch Noy suggested two others, Zalman the Goldsmith and Salah & Bazri (Minutes of the Acre City Council meeting, 14 February 1952). The latter were prominent members of the Iraqi Jewish community who were executed during the early 1950s in Iraq as a result of their Zionism activity. Ironically, due to the fact that their names sound Arabic, the city’s Arab residents assume to this day that they were, in fact, Arabs – and thus do not deface the street signs that bear their names.

The names given illustrate an attempt to connect Acre with Judaism and Jewish history. The two streets in the newer part of Acre that enter the Old City were also given names with a strong Zionist character: Hahagana, which was the main Jewish paramilitary organisation during the period of the British Mandate of Palestine, and Haim Weizmann, a Zionist leader and the first president of the State of Israel (Figure 3).

It is noteworthy that the two Arabic names designated during the British Mandate were not changed. Leaving Arab names intact was very unusual during the formative years of the newly established state, which was busy changing the physical and symbolic space (Azaryahu and Golan 2001). This is especially significant in the case of Salah a Din, a prominent Muslim historical hero who was (and still is) strongly affiliated with the Islamic aspect of Arab identity, and primarily with anti-Zionist and anti-Western sentiments (Azaryahu 2004).

Several additional names were given in the Old City between 1952 and the mid-1960s. For example, Portzei Hamivtzar (the fortress breakers) was named after the Etzel underground movement’s operation to liberate Jewish prisoners from the British jail located in the ancient Crusader castle of Acre. A square was named after Haim Pharhi, the Jewish treasurer of Al Jazzar in the eighteenth century. Those two names join the names given in the early 1950s, reflecting attempts to ‘Judaise’ the space of the Old City.

1965–1969
Most of the street names in Acre’s Old City were chosen during the second half of the 1960s. The street names were proposed by the local branch of the Rotary Club, which was led during this period by Bernhard Dichter, at that time also a council member and previously Acre’s city engineer. The street names that were given related mostly to important personalities in the city’s history, to personalities who presumably had visited it in the past, or to other cities that had a historical relationship with Acre, such as the Italian city-states Genoa, Pisa, Venice and Amalfi (Minutes of the Acre Street Naming Committee, 16 February 1966). The wholesale name-giving during this period was based on a trend ‘to develop overseas tourism in Acre and to bring the city’s residents and visitors closer to the city’s rich history’ (Katran 1968). The idea was to initiate a series of special ceremonies to which representatives of the relevant country or relevant religious denominations would be invited (Minutes of the Acre Street-Naming Committee, 17 May 1967).

An analysis of the street names proposed by the Rotary Club and by Dichter that appear in Figure 3 shows a distinct shift towards the names of Jewish and Christian personalities; however, three new Arab names were included in their initiative as well (Table 1). The initiative for many of Acre’s street names came from Dichter, a scholar who studied the city’s history. His principal field of research was Acre during the Crusader Period, a fact that was reflected in names given to streets in the Old City. It could be argued that Acre’s Crusader Period was more historically significant than the following periods, which were characterised by decay and decline; however it should also be
noted that the majority of the population in the Old City when this naming took place were Arabs and for the local residents these choices, even if they could historically be justified, were perceived as part of an effort to erase the Arab and Muslim history of Acre. It should be emphasised that in the Muslim discourse and imagination, the term ‘Crusaders’ has immense negative resonance.

In reality, the posting of the signs did not materialise immediately after naming decisions were made, and Dichter himself complained some years later about this (Protocol of the Acre Tourism and Leisure Committee, 2 January 1968). The posting process was sporadic.

One of the first signs was posted in 1974; it was Pacher a Din street, named after one of the rulers from the early Ottoman period. The reason the Israeli authorities chose this street in particular was probably due to the fact that Pacher a Din was of Druze origin. This ethnic group, despite its Arab origin, is very close to the Israeli establishment, which saw an opportunity to strengthen relations with the Druze community by naming a street in Acre after one of its leaders. Indeed, Sheikh Amin Tarif, the religious leader of the Druze community, was invited to the ceremony, which took place in Han el Omdan in the Old City of Acre on 7 November 1974, with the presence of Israeli government ministers and other dignitaries (Ariel 1974).

The ADC’s intensive activity of posting the signs around the Old City took place roughly 25 years after the actual decision, in the first years of the third millennium. However, some signs were never posted; for example, the one for Daher el Omar, who was an important local ruler in the region in the eighteenth century. Was the fact that a street named for an Arab

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**Table 1 Street-naming statistics in Acre**

<table>
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<th>Greco-Roman</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
<th>Crusaders</th>
<th>Muslim and Arab history</th>
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<th>Baha’i</th>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>4</td>
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**Figure 3** The official street names in the Old City created by the naming committees since 1948
leader never saw signage a mistake or intentional? It is worth mentioning that several people who were interviewed for this study noted the injustice of the fact that a Daher el Omar street does not exist in Acre. They were unaware that the street name, in fact, exists and even appears on some city maps, because in reality no street signs bear this name.

1970–1997

Since the activities of Dichter and Rotary in the mid-1960s, only two new names have been added to the Old City of Acre, and one existing name was altered slightly at the request of the Bahá’í community. In 1975, the municipality of Acre decided to name part of the wharf at the marina after Austrian prince Leopold II, who fought during the Crusades in Acre (Minutes of the Acre Street Naming Committee, 4 March 1975). The municipality approached the Austrian embassy in order to organise a ceremony with their presence. In 1996, the municipality decided to name the street near the Shazlya mosque after Sheikh Ali Nur Aldin Elyashruti, to commemorate 100 years since his death. The fact that his grandchild, the current leader of the Jordan-based sect, came to visit with a large group of followers as a direct result of the 1994 peace agreement with Jordan probably helped the committee reach this decision (Minutes of the Acre Executive Committee, 30 January 1996). Finally, in 1997, the Bahá’í community requested that Bahá’u’llah Street (whose sign was actually affixed in 1985, 20 years after the official naming decision) be changed to Bahá’í Street, since they deemed the appearance of the name of the founder of their religion on a street sign as offensive. The municipality accepted their request (Minutes of the Acre Street-Naming Committee, 4 April 1997).

The selection of names since 1965 has been aimed at celebrating the history of Acre rather than commemorating national-religious narratives, with an emphasis on the Crusader era because the Crusaders’ underground city is the main archaeological attraction of the Old City. However, the selective process of affixing street signs in the Old City, which led to a de facto change in the official decisions made by the naming committees throughout the years, resulted in the commodification of national-religious narratives in any event. This is reflected in the official tourist map of Acre’s Old City that was produced and distributed by the ADC (Figure 4). It clearly shows a bias toward names related to ancient Jewish and modern Zionist history and is not in line with the original intentions of the naming committee decisions made in the late 1960s.

Recent years

In October 2008 violence erupted between Acre’s Jewish and Arab populations. The spark that ignited the riots was an Arab resident who drove his car through a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, allegedly playing loud music in what Jewish residents called a deliberate provocation. As a result, tension in the city has increased and the struggle over the naming of places continues.

A year later, during the summer of 2009, the Old City’s harbour was named after Zeev Fried, one of the founders of the Israeli military and civilian navy, by the municipality. In an act of protest, the residents of the Old City chose to name the harbour after Issa al Awam, one of Salah a Din’s commanders, erecting a monument with the name in close proximity to the municipality’s marker. The conflict was solved early in 2010 when the Acre city council decided to officially accept the naming by the local residents; today, the harbour pier is named after Zeev Fried and the entrance to the harbour is named after Issa al Awam.

Local place names

Power struggles in Acre can be seen in maps – both official maps produced by the establishment and alternative cognitive maps used by the city’s residents. The ADC’s street map of Acre (Figure 4) includes only a few of the official street names that were given over the years, with a bias towards the early phase of naming in the 1950s and less of the more historically balanced street names given at the suggestion of the Rotary Club. In contrast, the residents’ mental map (Figure 5) presents the designations of streets and locations in the Old City as used by the locals.

Field work and conversations with city residents reveal that they do not use the city’s official street names. Local residents have termed these ‘the streets’ foreign names’ (interview with Muhdan, January 2005). Instead, they use the original names, which were passed down from one generation to another as a form of ‘oral tradition’. Most residents are not familiar with the new names given to the streets, and locations are identified by the names of the Arab neighbourhoods utilised in the past, central locations within the neighbourhoods such as important buildings, prominent families or stores known to everyone. In addition to the ancient names of streets and neighbourhoods, the streets are numbered according to the block and parcel numbers applied during the British Mandate period. These street numbers are embedded in the walls of the buildings in the Old City, and some residents continue to use these numbers for orientation and identification purposes. For example, the market street is commonly known as ‘Street number 13’ (even though in reality the whole area is part of block 13).

Many residents call Acre’s Old City ‘one large family’, and their orientation is based on alternative
names that develop, change and are reinvented periodically to make life easier for themselves and for outsiders who need to reach them. The dissonance between the official map and the alternative map familiar to the Old City’s residents is considerable; many residents are entirely unaware of the fact that official names exist. Conversations with residents demonstrated that they are familiar with one name only: Salah a Din Street.

One notable example of the gap between the official names and the residents’ alternative names is Aboud Square, as it is known by the locals, named for Elias Aboud, a wealthy Christian resident who sold his house to the Baha’is in the mid-nineteenth century. However, the square’s official name is now Genoa Square. It is worth noting that while a street sign listing its official name (Plate 4) can be found in the square, none of the local residents refer to it as Genoa Square. Another example is Venice Square; it is known locally as Al Jerinah, which in Arabic means ‘the place for the collection of the wheat’, since it was from this square that wheat was distributed for storage for centuries.

Further examples of this phenomenon include the Tapesh ascent (part of the ‘Majdali’ neighbourhood), which is named after a grocery store, rather than its given name, Yosef Ben Mattitiyahu, the Hebrew name of the Jewish Roman historian Josephus Flavius. The names of the Arab neighbourhoods include Harat al Mubalata (‘the paved one’), Harat al Qala (‘the fort’), Sheikh Abdullah (the religious leader – Mufti – of Acre in the British Mandate period), Harat al Shuni, Al Aki (after a wealthy family that had a large house in the neighbourhood) and ‘Al Majdali’. None of these neighbourhoods have official names. As one of the local Arab residents (who also works as a tourism coordinator in the Acre Old City community centre) told me: ‘The locals are simply oblivious to the street names. They are just for the tourists, and even the younger generation does not use them’ (interview with Zahara, January 2005).

This dissonance is acutely reflected in the delivery of mail in the city. Mail is delivered by a postman who is a resident of the Old City, who grew up locally and knows the people. All mail arrives at the main post office in the new part of the city; from there, it is sent to the Old City. Mail is delivered almost exclusively according to British block and street numbers, rather than by official street names. Even government ministries send mail to
the Old City based on block numbers rather than names. In addition, many houses do not have mailboxes and letters are delivered directly to the addressee or are left under a door (interview with Jallal, January 2005). As Acre’s deputy postmaster explained: ‘This is an oral tradition that is passed from one generation to the next’ (interview with Attias, January 2005).

The fact that the municipality named two streets in East Acre after personalities whose names were already used for Old City streets (Ramban and Ramchal) serves to underscore the fact that the naming effort of the 1960s had no impact on the local administration – the basic rule of street-naming is that no two streets in a city should have one and the same name (Azaryahu 2004).

Resident attitudes towards the street names and tourism development

Arab residents are not a part of the decisions on tourism made by the ADC or the municipality, and the tremendous development that the city is undergoing is mainly geared towards physical infrastructure and not social services or economic development programmes for the local population. Residents feel that no investment is being made in their welfare and that authorities are distancing them from the various projects being undertaken.

Severe socioeconomic problems faced by most of the city’s residents, together with the need to confront harsh difficulties daily, have resulted in a disregard for the street names issue, and even a lack of awareness of the official names. As a prominent Arab journalist living in the Old City told me:

Local residents have more pressing problems than the street names – they need to survive on a daily basis. The names issue is a luxury that only the winning side can afford to indulge in. If your house is falling apart, you don’t have time to deal with names. The new names do not make people angry, and the locals simply don’t use them. Some people just don’t know that Aboud Square is Genoa Square; as far as they are concerned it’s just a sign. The people of Acre’s Old City are simple; they have no awareness of the issue. The name remains on the sign, but they are not conscious of it. This is neither beneficial nor harmful – they are simply oblivious to the problem. (Interview with Shalachat, January 2005)

However, as socioeconomic status increases, the awareness and the objections increase as well, as is reflected in the views of the intellectuals:

Arab names should not be removed and replaced with Christian ones. Why have Genoa instead of Aboud? People
have grown up with this. It destroys the collective Arab memory; the names can be used as a dimension that adds flavour and colour to the tourist trail. (Interview with Matta, January 2005)

Responses of this kind form the flip side of the coin with regard to the residents’ attitudes to street names. Some people are very angry about the street names, expressing frustration with the establishment. The more educated elements of the population feel antagonism about the street names; less-educated residents get upset only when the subject is raised. The new street names create a feeling among local residents that their identity has been supplanted, their history rewritten. This further results in the sense that there is a lack of basic justice on the part of the establishment, as the chairman of the Alyatar organisation, which deals with cultural and social issues in the Arab sector, told me: ‘The ADC is severing our identity. Acre also has a Muslim and Palestinian history – where is it? This will leave people feeling hurt and uncomfortable’ (interview with Hawary, January 2005). No representatives of the local Arab population of Acre sit on the board of the ADC. Both non-Jewish representatives on the board come from outside Acre.

The disregard of local Arab heritage, as reflected in the failure to commemorate Arab names, created a sense of alienation among local residents. The issue is discussed at meetings, with frustration voiced primarily by Arab students and intellectuals. The feeling at these meetings is that the names are ‘depriving the Old City of its Arab history and disinherit it from its history’ (interview with Haj, January 2005). The residents see no problem with tourist names existing alongside local names. They have no desire to impede tourism, but they also wish to be taken into consideration, to pursue their right to the city.

Fieldwork in Acre revealed that the gap between the names results in a clash between tourists and local residents, as the tourist knows the official names that appear on the map and arguments arise between residents and tourists as to whether such locations exist.

The residents’ feelings on the subject of official street names can be summarised in the comments made by a city council member from the Hadash party:7

Everyone in the area is familiar with the name Aboud Square. When the square was redeveloped and a fountain was placed in it, its name was changed to Genoa Square. Is the name Aboud no good for aesthetic things? Why Genoa? It’s illogical, unsuitable and incompatible with Acre’s soul or the people who live here. This is not a new square that was constructed recently; you can’t simply come along and change the names that everyone in the area knows. It’s very rude and ignores the feelings of local residents; the youngsters view it as a mockery. (Interview with Ouda, January 2005)

A well-known Arab tour guide in the city suggests that the Judaisation process of the Old City of Acre generates antagonism that is exploited by extremists. He contends that there are many leaders, writers, poets and intellectuals accepted among the Arab sector who do not clash with the Israeli state. Moreover, Arab tourists to the city wish to see the names of Arab personalities. These include, he suggests, Dahar el Omar, the first Arab ruler to build a Palestinian entity (he does in fact have a street named after him, but it never was made public), and writers and poets such as Samira Azam, who was one of the first female fiction writers in the Arab world (interview with Matta, January 2005).

On occasion, proposals have been made to commemorate the names of Arab personalities, but these suggestions rarely bear fruit, since all of the Old City’s streets are already named and the political power of the residents is weak; the Arab population in Acre as a whole is a minority and thus is represented in the local governance as such. Residents perceive the failure to commemorate Arab personalities as a weakness and a lack of power on the part of both local residents and the local Arab leadership. At the same time, residents have not confronted the issue head-on: some feel
powerless and some are rendered indifferent due to socioeconomic concerns, unable to mobilise for a purpose so far removed from their everyday struggles. Those who do discuss the issue accuse the Acre municipality of being disinterested in commemorating Arab personalities, saying that even when naming requests are made, they are rejected.

From conversations held with representatives of the city’s Jewish establishment, it seems that those in power either did not care or did not understand the local residents and street names. The deputy director general of the Acre municipality claimed that ‘some Old City residents are illiterate so that the issue of street names does not bother them’ (interview with Otmazgin, January 2005). He contended that street names in the Old City were given in an effort to provide easier access and better service. This is the accepted view among many official representatives, including the mayor’s advisor, who is responsible for the promotion of tourism in the city. He claims that the street signs are primarily posted for the tourists, and that the residents are completely unaware of the issue. ‘It’s not part of the culture of the Old City’s residents. There is no demand for street names on the part of the city’s residents nor is there any intentional discrimination.’ He added that Christian (i.e. Crusader names) street names were given because the Christians were more important in Acre’s history than anyone else (interview with Ben Ezra, January 2005). The director general of the ADC is also of the opinion that there is no clash between the street names and local residents, and he sees no need to replace the street names (interview with Harari, February 2005).

The Jewish route and the Islamic movement signs as a tool of resistance

In April 2004, in preparation for a visit by Minister of Tourism Binyamin Elon – who also happened to be the head of the right-wing National Union party at that time – the ADC posted signs marking the first tourist trail in the Old City, the ‘Jewish route’, guiding visitors through a walk in the footsteps of Jewish figures who were active in Acre. Signs were placed at prominent points on numerous street corners, accompanied by explanations in Hebrew only (Plate 3). If the attitude of the Old City’s residents to the street signs could be described as ‘annoyance’, then, to borrow Doxey’s terminology, their attitude to the signs marking the ‘Jewish route’ reached the stage known as ‘antagonism’ (Doxey 1975). This mobilised the local population towards active resistance in this regard. Many residents expressed anger in relation to the signs, viewing them as a form of invasion and occupation of the Old City. Residents regard the signs as a clear effort at Jewish domination and deliberate discrimination by the authorities. Thus the contents of the signs, the disregard for the residents’ original place names, and the suppression of the city’s Arab identity have resulted in some residents defacing the signs along the Jewish route.

During the summer of 2004, signs were posted all over the Old City by the local branch of the Islamic Movement, based in Al Ramel mosque near the souk and led by Sheikh Muhammad Mahadi. Hundreds of bright green signs containing verses from the Quran and other Muslim sources were posted in prominent locations around the Old City (see, for example, Plate 3 and Figure 5). These signs sought to bring the residents closer to their religion and religious beliefs, and also called for social justice, a dignified life and a return to modest personal qualities – for example, one sentence directed towards women states: ‘a veiled face will bring you God’s love’. According to local residents, the signs were posted in response to the actions of the authorities and the ADC. A Hadash city council member told me:

Local residents have been neglected and mistreated, and this is the response to their frustration. This may not fit the nice theory that this is a tourist city and World Heritage centre, but it suits the local residents. It may anger the Jews, but they won’t dare take down the signs because the simple man in the street here identifies with them and he will fight their removal. Even I, as a council member, do not want to remove the signs. How will you take them down? It’s a sign of the situation. (Interview with Oudah, January 2005)

Such signs are not unique to Acre; in fact, in other Arab cities and villages they are also posted as part of the struggle for power within Arab society. However, in the case of Acre it seems that they are indeed part of the response to the ADC, to the street-naming and to other signs for tourists – the green plaques were specifically placed near ‘tourist signs’ in order to indicate ‘who the city belongs to’.

The Islamic Movement’s signs constitute further competition with the authorities for control of symbolic space in the city. By posting its signs, the Islamic Movement markets itself and competes for control of local residents. At the same time, the signs constitute an attempt to reach an equilibrium with the Jewish Route signs and the new street signs, giving Acre a more Islamic and Arab character. The establishment does not take a favourable view of the phenomenon, but nevertheless the municipality accepts the signs and has not acted to remove them (interview with Otmazgin, January 2005).

Conclusions

After 1948, the Israeli administration found what was almost a ‘terra incognita’, in terms of existing street names in Acre. In the following decades, the names that were added were primarily Jewish and Israeli in nature, and only toward the mid-1960s did the naming base itself on a narrative that was more objective historically.
Street-naming, tourism development and cultural conflict

Analysis of the street names in Acre reveals that at least in the mid-1960s, when most of the names were designated, the forces behind this process were less nationalistic than were those naming other places in Israel in the early days of the Jewish State. The urban landscape of Acre’s Old City was intended to be an expression of tourism consumption, as the main idea behind the naming was to assist tourists and visitors to the Old City in navigating the maze of streets and alleys. Thus, diminishing the Arab character of the city may have been an additional motive, but it was certainly not the primary one.

Most of the street names signs were not affixed until recent years, and the process that started at the beginning of the current millennium was selective. The decision about which signs to post was made by the leadership of the ADC, with no public discussions held by elected decisionmakers. The omission of Arab street names such as Daher el Omar and Suleiman Pasha, the adopted son and successor of Al Jazzar Pasha, added to the high tension between the local residents, the authorities and the visitors. As a result of the selective posting of the street signs, the emphasis on the Jewish and Christian names, which were already in a higher proportion than the planned Arab names, became even more dominant. This leads to a general conclusion that the temporality of street-naming is crucial – if a name change is adopted on paper but signs are not installed in a timely fashion (or are unevenly implemented), this then changes the political significance of the streetscape intended in the first place.

The tensions regarding street-naming are not only the result of clash between bottom-up and top-down naming and attachments to the local traditions, but importantly also between two different approaches to the heritage to be commemorated in the street signs of the Old City of Acre: whereas the original approach of the municipality largely aimed at commemorating the local history of the city, Arab-Muslim activists in the Old City are in favour of commemorating the current identity of the Old City of Acre which is an Arab/Muslim/Palestinian one.

Over the years, it appears, the local Arab population and its leadership have shifted their strategy from passive acceptance to raising awareness by issuing written materials and initiating efforts to add street names that reflect their sense of history and identity. On a conceptual level it can be asserted that they started to claim their right to the city, at this stage only on the symbolic level, in order to signal that they were becoming active actors regarding decisions related to the space they inhabit and not merely spectators.

At a later stage, the Islamic Movement started a phase of active resistance by posting its own signs in the city. The signs powerfully illustrate not only the contested politics of the symbolic landscape of Acre but also how an ‘unauthorised’ inscription can acquire a form of quasi-acceptance from the authorities, who fear the consequence of removing them. This success led to additional actions regarding the struggle over the identity and spirit of the Old City. Recently residents of the Old City took decisive action regarding a new naming effort in the fishing harbour of Acre, resulting in a symbolic victory that led to an acceptance of the local population’s right to influence the development of narratives in the Old City. Only time will tell whether this was an ad hoc change of policy of both sides or a new beginning in the power relations between the local residents of the Old City and the establishment.

Beyond the detailed study of the street-naming process in Acre and the attitude of local residents, five general conclusions can also be drawn from our research. First, the wellbeing of a city’s residents cannot be separated from tourism development (Cohen-Hattab and Shoval 2007). Issues of social justice in tourism and inequality are gaining an important impetus in the theory of urban tourism development (Eisenger 2000; Richards and Hall 2000; Russo 2002; Short 2008) and should also be taken into account when implemented in reality. Failure to invest in residents and the perpetuation of severe socioeconomic conditions has resulted in the alienation of the locals and a lack of involvement on their part in activity in the city. Thus the residents continue to take an alternative spatial view of street names and have an aversion to the tourism/establishment space in Acre’s Old City. Second, a policy that is not implemented in a timely fashion can, over the course of time and through selective implementation, change in character, becoming entirely different from its initial intent. Third, the struggles over space in Acre – a residential, tourist and symbolic space – can serve to help understand the complexity of the much bigger conflict in the region. Fourth, while the place-name literature continues to grow in volume and critical perspective, it has not yet adequately addressed the involvement of naming in the promotion of place for tourism development. Furthermore, studies of place-naming in the relatively young country of Israel have focused on motivations related to nationalism and state formation. The importance of taking into account the local residents’ consumption of these place names once they are given has been demonstrated. Finally this article suggests an expansion in Lefebvre’s concept (1991 1996) of the right to the city beyond the tangible to struggles over the symbolic realm in cities. Not only struggle for democratizing development decisions by residents taking power over spatial production – in effect challenging conventional property rights and redistributive rights (Mitchell 2003; Purcell 2003) – but also struggles over the meaning of space, focusing on intangible aspects of space of the city: its symbolic values, its spirit and ethos.
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Notes

1 The Baha’i Faith is the youngest of the world’s independent religions. It has approximately five million followers around the world. Its founder, Baha’u'llah (1817–1892), is regarded by Baha’is as the most recent in the line of Messengers of God that stretches back beyond recorded time and that includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad.

2 Nikanor was the name of one of the gates of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. According to tradition, the gates were donated by a wealthy Jewish man from Alexandria named Nikanor.

3 The explanations of the Arab names are taken in the main from Shmali (1992, 42–59; translated from Arabic), and from interviews with Shmali and Maher Zahara.

4 The choice of Josephus Flavius and Julius Caesar to represent the Roman period is a selective one, since Josephus’s patrons Vespasian and Titus, who arrived in the city in AD 66 and eventually destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, were not named in Acre. The same applies to Hadrian, who visited the city, but also crushed the Bar Kochva rebellion (AD 132–135).

5 Also known as Harat el Abid. A simple translation for this term is ‘slave’, but it also refers to black people, since many of them were slaves in Arab societies. This neighbourhood was inhabited by people of Sudanese origin, who came with Ibrahim Pasha from Egypt in the 1830s to develop the silk industry (interview with Zahara, January 2005).

6 Zahara explains that this name derives from the people who come from the village of Majd el Krum to Acre to work as floorers, but he adds that there are other views regarding the origin of the name. Shmali suggests that it came about because some residents came originally from Majdal Askalan (today’s Ashkelon).

7 Hadash is an Israeli political party functioning at the national and local levels. It is a coalition of several parties, the predominant one being the Israeli Communist Party.

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