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Immersive invisibility in the settler colonial city

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Immersive invisibility in the settler colonial city: The conditional inclusion of Palestinians in Tel Aviv

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Abstract

The inclusion of indigenous people into settler colonial cities is often highly conditional. Among middle-class Palestinian citizens of Israel in Tel Aviv, the invisibility of their ethno-national identity is a precondition for their access to the city's neoliberal economy and "liberal" lifestyle. To increase their mobility and socio-economic opportunities, they employ diverse tactics of immersive invisibility. Some aspire to be recognized as unmarked individuals and successful professionals in the hope to override the stigmatization of their identity. Although immersive invisibility does not change settler colonial exclusion, it determines how much individuals can achieve within existing parameters. Instead of transcending categorical difference and racialized exclusion, tactics of immersive invisibility reveal how neoliberal inclusion and exclusive settler colonial politics become entangled and constitute one another.

Keywords: *visibility, identity, urban inclusion, stigmatization, settler colonialism, Palestine, Israel*

For Palestinians, the role of urban space in Tel Aviv is not to be seen. We came to Tel Aviv to be anonymous, as a collective. People don't think about conquering Tel Aviv back…Palestinians in Tel Aviv don't want to be marked. (…) but most reach a breaking point after two years, two years is enough to realize that they can't blend in here.

Muhammad, former Tel Aviv resident

On a square below high-rising towers in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv, white-collar workers rush from their offices to the nearby train station. This "Diamond Exchange District" is one of the city's major commercial areas, and this is where I meet the young engineer Azhar, a Palestinian citizen of Israel who works for a technology startup.[1] She is dressed in smart office attire and, at first glance, nothing distinguishes her from the passing crowds. But then I recognize the golden necklace she is wearing, which says in shiny Arabic letters, *filistin* – Palestine. How, I ask, do her Jewish-Israeli colleagues react to this "statement"? Touching it for a second, as if surprised to re-discover it, she says: "I take it off when I enter the office, and when I leave the office, I put it on again. At work, politics don't exist."

The law student Hisham used similar tactics. Initially, he had organized protests and commemorations of the Nakba, the Palestinian displacement of 1948, outside the Tel Aviv University campus: while students formed the letters N-A-K-B-A as a visible human chain against the backdrop of posters that showed former villages and displaced elders, agitated crowds of Jewish-Israeli nationalists held a counter-protest. Only one year later, however, Hisham applied for internships at legal firms in Tel Aviv, which required him to cultivate a different kind of image: censoring his Facebook profile and scaling back his public political activities, at least for the time being. Talking in his flat outside the university, Hisham suddenly walks off into his room and returns with a *kuffiyeh*, the Palestinian scarf, saying: "If I

go to university with this kuffiyeh, everybody will look at me and think I am a terrorist. We avoid wearing such symbols. If you want to live normal in this society, you learn to hide politics."

These practices indicate a common theme among stigmatized minorities: tactics of (in)visibility that involve displaying or hiding certain aspects of their identity. Similar dynamics have long been part of social relationships, as individuals keep some opinions and aspects of identity "backstage," while putting others willfully into the front region (Goffman 1990). Sometimes they do so as they are immerse into a potentially hostile environment, practicing a form of "social camouflage" not dissimilar from the disguise of camouflage animals or undercover agents (Brighenti and Castelli 2016). More than a mere function of social relationships, (in)visibility poses key problems for the constitution of intersubjective life (Brighenti 2010). Palestinians in Tel Aviv face a very particular "problem": immersion into a settler colonial city whose residents and officials often perceive their ethno-national identity as unwanted and even threatening.

Tactics of *invisibility* can help people access professional opportunities despite stigmatization, but the ability to do so is bound up with differences in class and identity. Wealthy urbanites can perform "conspicuous invisibility" to manage what others see and know about them, while cities often force the urban poor into the invisibility of informal spaces (Wacquant 2008, 240; Harms 2013). In a similar vein, minorities of gender, culture, and religion cannot always control what kind of visibility they command in public (Bayat 2013, 17; Ghorashi 2010). Invisibility thus has very different qualities for different people. Its effects can be "self-voicing" just as they can be the effect of "being silenced" (Sözer 2014, 10).

The central factor that determines these qualities among Palestinians in Tel Aviv is citizenship or legal status. Unlike Azhar and Hisham, who are highly educated Palestinian

citizens of Israel, Palestinians from the occupied West Bank can only access this city on restrictive working permits. Israeli authorities often deny them on "security" grounds, forcing tens of thousands to enter illegally and hide underground. To them, invisibility is a form of being silenced. It has different qualities for Palestinian *citizens* of Israel, who do not need permits to take up residence or work in Tel Aviv and enjoy certain "privileges" – highly conditional, as we will see – that transform invisibility into a resource against stigmatization and exclusion.

This is especially true of educated middle-class citizens who have the right background to be successful in Tel Aviv and the right aspirations to immerse temporarily into its spaces of employment and consumption. Like a dive under water, tactical invisibility allows them to immerse into the "neoliberal city under the illiberal state" (Bayat 2012). The problem is that they must keep on diving because this settler colonial city and the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict turn invisibility into a precondition for accessing the city's "liberal" opportunities and lifestyle.

Despite this seemingly uninviting reality, Tel Aviv's booming economy has become an important center for the growing Palestinian middle class in Israel. Palestinian citizens of Israel (to whom I refer from here on as "Palestinians"), have long pushed into Jewish-Israeli cities, where housing, education, public services and jobs are better than in the often under-funded Arab municipalities. Of the roughly 2,000 Palestinians who studied at Tel Aviv University at the time of research, many hoped to stay on in Tel Aviv after graduation. Others came from elsewhere in Israel to work as doctors, pharmacists, and software engineers, and some embraced the city's lifestyle as artists and creative multi-jobbers. In one way or another, most made use of immersive invisibility to evade identity-referencing constraints: "constraint" because discrimination and stigmatization restrict their mobility and access, and "identity-

referencing" because Jewish Israeli employers, landlords, or security guards often enforce restrictions on Palestinians.

In response, people with the "wrong" group membership sometimes seek invisibility to participate quietly in cities and move around freely, rather than building a visible "case of identity" (Agier 2002, 333; Bayat 2013). Especially in a settler colonial city that fends off indigenous identity, urban outsiders employ tactics of compromise instead of "hidden resistance" that would subverts governing norms: these situational *tactics* allow them to react to shifting contexts and insinuate themselves into the "other's place" fragmentarily, "without taking it over" (De Certeau 2011, xix; Scott 1990). Rather than reclaiming a city with grand collective strategies, tactics of invisibility allow stigmatized urban outsiders to make use of it from within. They are essentially tactics of *immersive invisibility,* temporarily employed to blend into an urban space from which their identity is categorically excluded. This offers an important alternative to visible articulations of, and claims to, urban citizenship as expressions of difference that seek to "transform the city" (Blokland et al. 2015).

Unable to make identity-based claims for collective recognition, some indigenous urban minorities rather *use* the city to "transform" themselves and their lives, not by expressing difference, but by minimizing its visibility. As a situational tactic, immersive invisibility can pierce the illiberal shell of a city, but does it lead to sustainable inclusion and equal urban citizenship?

Here it is one thing to merely hide what the dominant national majority perceives as unwanted, but another to hide what it perceives as *threatening*: as a symbol of indigeneity, forced displacement, and resistance, Palestinian national identity threatens the very legitimacy of Tel Aviv as an ostensibly liberal and purely Jewish modern city, the so-called "First Hebrew City." One reason for this "threat" is that such national identity emphasizes the similarity and shared history of Palestinians within Israel and Palestinians living under Israeli

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occupation or in exile. It would threaten the depoliticized space of urban immersion "without difference." This means that Tel Aviv does not invite Palestinians to seek recognition and inclusion as people with an "authentic" indigenous culture, as multicultural settler colonial states like Australia do (Povinelli 2002). Tel Aviv is different in the sense that it developed an exclusive form of "ethno-liberalism" that categorically excludes Palestinian identity from any multicultural policy. Its settler colonial character and the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict serve as the basis for Palestinian citizens' ethnoracial exclusion as "suspects" by definition (Lamont et al. 2016, 266; Khalidi 1997, 2).

The settler colonial character of Tel Aviv's ethno-liberalism means that Azhar's avoidance of "politics" is different from stigmatized minorities that simply keep a low profile in cities with failing cosmopolitanisms (Brink-Danan 2011). As citizens within a Jewish state, Palestinians are exiles at home who live with a condition of permanent political displacement, which create tensions between identity and space (Hackl 2017, 64). Such tension is exemplified by the "elephant in the room" they must "get rid of," as psychologist Muna described the act of hiding her own necklace with Arabic lettering during therapy practice with Jewish patients. She added: "I didn't want to bring *it* up; it gets really complicated and difficult."

This "it" is what Azhar referred to as "politics" and stands symbolically for aspects of Palestinian identity that unsettle Tel Aviv's carefully crafted image and its ostensibly liberal character. Immersive invisibility answers crucial questions about how indigenous minorities and members of "enemy" groups in conflicts can benefit from living in large cities despite being categorically excluded. Despite their isolated nature, these invisible practices will not remain entirely without wider societal effects. As one Palestinian film student in Tel Aviv put it: "I am using their opportunities to be stronger against them."

Unearthing Palestinian Tel Aviv

The settler colonial city has often been described as a "white place" for indigenous exclusion *par excellence*, while indigenous urbanites are delegitimized as "inauthentic" people who assimilated and lost their culture (Gagné and Trépied 2016, 8–11). Palestinian tactics of immersive invisibility are neither a story of indigenous resistance nor one of assimilation. They seek pragmatic access to an urban space in response to a history of exclusion and dispossession, thereby negotiating a particular regime of settler colonial-liberal incorporation. Jewish residents and foreign visitors perceive the city largely as a likeable, innovative, and liberal Mediterranean metropolis. As Yonatan Mendel wrote in an essay entitled "Fantasising Israel" on the occasion of Tel Aviv's centenary, this seemingly "most 'liberal' and 'tolerant' city in Israel, as its residents like to imagine it, is not only 100 years old, but almost 100 per cent Arab-free" (Mendel 2009).

That this fantasy of an Arab-free modern city is rooted in the forced displacement of Palestinians became evident during an unusual tour of Tel Aviv in which I took part. "Welcome to Sheikh Munis," the guide announced to the group of young Palestinian students gathered around him. Sheikh Munis – or *al-Sheikh Muwannis* – was once a Palestinian village and its land is now where Tel Aviv University stands. Developers turned the only remaining mansion, the Green House, into a social club for university employees. The tour led the students to places where their Palestinian history remained visible, if only barely, such as the abandoned graveyard hidden behind shrubbery in a park outside the seaside Hilton Hotel.[2] Further south on the seashore close to Jaffa, the former Palestinian port city, was once the al-Manshiyya neighborhood, where the tour stopped to inspect an old stone building turned into an Israeli military museum, at the entrance of which one finds the inscription, "Etzel House: in memory of the liberators of Jaffa." Etzel was a unit of the pre-state Jewish militia, which was

no liberator for the Palestinians. This symbolised how Israel overwrites the history of this urban space to keep the Palestinian narrative invisible.

Ever since Jewish families gathered there in 1909 to lay the cornerstones of "the first modern, Hebrew city," this urban project evolved in strong opposition to Palestine, intensified Jewish colonization, and instantiated the Jews as a people of modern space (Mann 2006, xii–xiii; Levine 2005). While Israel became a state in 1948, the Palestinians experienced their national catastrophe, the Nakba: Jewish forces and armed conflict triggered the coerced flight and expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from Israel's newly captured territory; south of today's Tel Aviv, Israel conquered Jaffa and drove out more than 90 percent of its Palestinian residents as part of the wider destruction of Palestinian urbanism (Robinson 2013; Rabinowitz and Monterescu 2007, 5). This paved the way for Tel Aviv to subsume Jaffa, gradually turning it into the gentrified neighbourhood it is today. The supersession of indigenous people facilitated the growth of the settler colonial city and permanently restructured the relation between indigenous people and urban space (Veracini 2010; Edmonds 2010).

As it evolved into a neoliberal and European-style city, Tel Aviv began displaying the "dark side of modernism" (Yiftachel 1994): its planners and officials gradually erased Palestinian identity from the city's surface. This forced urban invisibility of indigenous minorities forms part of what it means to be a nation whose territory has been largely taken away (Simpson 2014, 10). However, immersing into the city's social and economic spaces allows individuals to respond to decades of state-sponsored marginalization proactively.

The growing relevance of Tel Aviv among Palestinian citizens is not mirrored by official recognition. Merely recognizing their existence as a significant urban minority would upset the city's very identity: in the words of former mayor Ron Khuldai, "Tel Aviv is not a mixed city. Indeed, we have a small Arab minority of four percent but it would be problematic to consider it as a mixed city" (Monterescu 2015, 126). Most Palestinians in the city do not

even appear in these official "four percent" because the city only counts Israeli citizens, among them only those who are residents, and consequently does not enumerate commuters, students, and many others.[3] Maybe ironically, this overall non-recognition creates opportunities for apolitical immersion that benefits Palestinian citizens in search of success and urban life.

This convergence of non-recognition and immersion is not without tensions. During the Nakba tour, standing where the Palestinian neighborhood al-Manshiyya once was, the guide showed around photographs of the former neighborhood before inviting the students to imagine a future return of Palestinian refugees. Equipped with flipchart paper they sat down in small groups in the parks along the seashore and conducted their exercise of imagining Palestinian refugees' return, which somewhat contrasted their ambiguous lives in Israel. Well educated and mostly from middle-class families, they all studied at Israeli universities. As one group wrote its outline of return in Hebrew instead of Arabic, another participant quickly denounced them as the "shabak" group, referring to Israel's Internal Security Agency notorious for blackmailing Palestinians into collaboration. Immersion into Tel Aviv, symbolized by the preference of Hebrew over Arabic, symbolizes for many a "loss" of national identity and integrity: activist circles sometimes refer to Palestinians in Tel Aviv as *Aravivim* – a term that combines the Hebrew words *Aravim* and *Tel Avivim*. Their immersion into Tel Aviv was criticized as early as 1929, when activists denounced Palestinians who visited the city's nightclubs as people in pursuit of "foul objectives" (Azaryahu 2007, 47).

Between settler colonial erasure and such controversy, the Palestinians in Tel Aviv have always coped with a dilemma of dual non-recognition: unrecognized within Tel Aviv as Palestinians, they are also unrecognized among Palestinians for blending into Tel Aviv. Indigenous minorities living in settler colonial cities often find themselves in such a double bind. They are not only structurally invisible to the settler state, but are simultaneously

marginalized by their own communities as a result of prevailing discourses about cultural [and political] authenticity (Barker and Gibbings 2016). Tactics of invisibility show how indigenous people can cope with this double bind of settler colonial cities, which requires careful balancing acts between urban immersion and sense of belonging and responsibility that contradict such immersion.

I conducted fieldwork during a particular time of relative quiescence, interrupted only by the disruption of the 2014 Gaza Conflict. Palestinians at the time were political disillusioned about decades of failed peace processes and the deepening of Israel's rule, some speaking of a "one-state condition" reality (Azoulay and Ophir 2012). Knowing that their stigmatization stems from deep political divides rooted in the wider conflict and its history, Palestinian exposed "equality" as a settler colonial mirage that distracts from deeper struggles for historical justice (Jamal 2011). But outside political parties and activist circles, many simply turn to a resigned political mood and pragmatic thinking. Part of this trajectory is the question of how to make most out of a city such as Tel Aviv despite an ongoing conflict on the national level. Tactics of *immersive invisibility* are one pragmatic answer to this question, allowing middle class citizens to participate in the city's economy and lifestyle as anonymous "strangers".

Anonymous together

Tel Aviv disallows some forms of visibility for Palestinian citizens, but it also enables other forms that make invisibility desirable in relation to other Palestinians. Meeting Hisham at his family house in Tur'an, a small town in the north, he explained, "If I come in shorts from Tel Aviv, I won't wear them here. Or if I had a beer in Tel Aviv, I wouldn't take one with me when I drive home. I wouldn't kiss my girlfriend on the street here, or hug her. In Tel Aviv all these things are easier." Psychologist Muna, who hid her necklace from Jewish clients, said

that she had much balancing to do between Tel Aviv and the home town she visited almost every weekend: "Here and there are things I have to give up." In Tel Aviv, the main sacrifice was political "normalization," the pressure to hide political opinions. But she added, "There are things I won't feel comfortable doing in the village. (…) there is something good about Tel Aviv: the secular liberal people." However, access to this "liberalism" required sacrifices, as Hisham's father put it: "Tel Aviv wants to be a liberal town, the good way of life. But we are talking about lots of discrimination too."

Palestinian citizens often contrasted Tel Aviv, nicknamed "The Bubble," with "tense" and "divided" Jerusalem. The image of a liberal bubble invited Palestinians with the right aspirations and privileges to take advantage of its qualities. As the actor and musician Mira Awad put it during a meeting in the city, Tel Aviv is a bubble "where you can sometimes rest, from the political, from the absorbed life that we have." This perception of an ostensibly apolitical city where the burden of identity and ethno-national conflict weighs less heavily on their shoulders was widespread among educated Palestinians in Tel Aviv.

For example, marketing expert Kheir had studied and worked in Tel Aviv for 13 years at the time of our first meeting, held on a late morning in a restaurant. While ordering a glass of sparkling wine over lunch, Kheir admitted she enjoyed some aspects of "liberal" Tel Aviv. Importantly for her, the city provided some distance from other Palestinians: "I think a lot of Arabs in Tel Aviv just like being anonymous in the city." Such anonymity is a particular kind of immersive middle-class invisibility: the ability to remain unmarked as a Palestinian by Jewish Israelis and simultaneously undisturbed as an urban individual by other Palestinians. It is a form of invisibility by choice that is only accessible to a minority of privileged urbanites, like the "blasé attitude" (Simmel 2011 [1903]) of urban civility that serves citizens as a social lubricant by enabling impersonal coexistence despite differences (Sennett 2002).

However, as civility encourages self-restraint and "respect" over possible disagreement (Calhoun 2000, 256), it gains a unique dimension in this settler colonial setting. The flattening of differences between urban strangers, as it is ascribed to modern cities, stops at the settler colonial difference between "friends" and "enemies," between colonisers and colonised. Thus, invisible immersion and anonymity only work for Palestinian citizens as long as they do not cross the parameters of "respect" imposed by dominant Israeli conceptions. As visible *Palestinians*, they cannot enjoy the city's "impersonal" qualities. In Sennett's (2002, 48) words, they are always the type of stranger that is "synonymous with the outsider." Anonymous immersion allows middle-class individuals to access to jobs, rental spaces, and urban leisure. But because invisibility as a Palestinian remains a precondition, such immersion does not reach deep enough to create a sense of belonging and urban citizenship, which requires the freedom to express "difference" (Blokland et al. 2015).

I first met Kheir through a group of highly educated and successful Palestinians in Tel Aviv, who held regular dinners in restaurants, where they listened to invited guest speakers and socialized. Many were the only Palestinian employee in their companies or the only "Arab" resident in their buildings. They had developed a sense of apolitical disconnection that had become the driving force of these often politicized gatherings. Tellingly, Kheir said she felt very little incentive to join the group when she first heard about it:

> I was a bit scared of suddenly meeting all these other Arabs. Here in Tel Aviv, we Arabs don't know each other. [We] see that there are a lot of other Arabs, but they ignore it. They don't really want to have a community within a community in this city. It is not what they come for. (…) We are anonymous together.

The group had about 35 affiliates and usually met for dinner in Israeli restaurants, which created a sense of hypervisibility and individual discomfort for Kheir:

> Once we met in a restaurant and invited [the politician] Ahmed Tibi as a guest. The waiters and the other guests stared at us, although we were in a separated backroom. When the men walked down with Tibi at the end of the meeting, chatting loudly in Arabic, walking between the tables, they attracted a lot of attention. People at this place saw thirty Arabs and probably thought: where did they come from?

Such collective presence dissolved the civility and anonymity that characterized immersive invisibility: collective visibility represented politics, it was the quintessential elephant in the room. In part, this was an intentional departure from the routines of their Tel Aviv lives. "[In these meetings] we don't talk about business, but we talk about community issues and politics," explained Zaki, one of the group's initiators, adding, "But outside of these meetings, in Tel Aviv, there is no sense of community."

As anonymity ends where visible Palestinian collectivity begins, the hypervisibility of such gatherings explains why some feel reluctant to participate in these gatherings. At the same time, Kheir's personal life showed that *individual* immersion into the city's life was not without difficulty either. When going out with friends, "Jewish guys" often approach her not realizing she was Palestinian, but then query her background and "accent": "They then often ask, 'Where are you from?', And when I say I am Arab, they say, '*really*?!'" Kheir said this moment was usually the end of conversations, hinting at a dilemma between being misrecognized as a non-Palestinian Jewish immigrant, or being recognized as a Palestinian in distorting ways. It recalls Frantz Fanon's description of "Negroes" in France, who found nothing more exasperating than being asked, "How long have you been in France? You speak French so well" (Fanon 1986, 35).

Although anonymity offers a sense of control, personal interactions make the question of identity ultimately inevitable: either actively pretend to be someone else, or be stigmatized as a Palestinian. The limits of "anonymous" immersion also become visible when Kheir talks

about her early Tel Aviv years, when she had a Jewish boyfriend, saying: "It took us two years to realize, when it got down to the real issues, that we actually don't know each other." The immense societal pressure against such mixed dating makes tactics of immersive invisibility in Tel Aviv all the more relevant.

Conviviality between joy and discomfort

Urban anonymity and invisibility are a burden because they limit in-group conviviality and the freedom of expressing one's identity visibly. This became clear as I crossed a street in Tel Aviv with Rima, a former student in the city, when she suddenly recognized friends on the other side. As if breaking out of an invisible cage, they screamed with enthusiasm and greeted and hugged each other. Alongside Samira were three Palestinian men. Standing on the sidewalk, soon all spoke Arabic. At one point, Rima said, "Wow! We are five Arabs here standing in the heart of Tel Aviv." Then Samira ran onto the middle of the street, screaming "*allahu akbar*" (God is great), towards a shopping mall on the other side. "It's like we are having a demonstration here," one of the others said, and all laughed amid exaggerated joy that spread from this incidental gathering. Tellingly, merely meeting other Palestinian friends and speaking Arabic on the streets of Tel Aviv already felt like a demonstration.

However, such joy can quickly turn to fear and discomfort. One of the men, who was gay and worked as a fitness trainer in Tel Aviv, looked familiar to Rima, but although they would later recognize each other as coming from the same town, they did not bring it up. "I didn't want to scare him by saying 'I know you from somewhere'," Rima explained later. To protect his anonymity, he went by a name that could be either Arabic or Hebrew. Meeting the wrong person at the wrong moment can be risky for Palestinians in Tel Aviv, especially when aspects of their identity challenge dominant societal norms.

On another day, Rima and I ate something in central Tel Aviv and this time it was her who used tactical invisibility. Sitting down at an outdoor food stall, we ordered two bottles of

beer when Rima suddenly turned to me in shock: one of the waiters, she said, was from her home town. The convenient anonymity Tel Aviv provided faded and was replaced by unsettling exposure: she asked me to change her order from beer to water, saying it was a mistake. As I would learn later, both knew exactly who each other's families were, but pretended not to. The young man took our order in Hebrew, and after a few minutes, Rima decided to break the ice. "Don't we know each other from somewhere?" she asked the waiter, who smirked for an instance and then answered in Arabic: "Yes, we are from the same town." Their small talk continued for about a minute, at the end of which she asked for his name. "My name is Adam," he said rather hurried. After a few seconds of silence, he added that his real name was Ahmed. "But here I am Adam," he continued, just before his manager told him to stop speaking Arabic.

Here, Israeli pressures to be invisible as a Palestinian, by changing names and not speaking Arabic, manifest themselves in the same situation as gendered tactics of invisibility that safeguard privacy between Palestinians. There was much at stake for the Palestinian woman who ordered beer, if only the danger of undesirable gossip spreading in her home town. Another Palestinian woman who lived in Jaffa said that she could rely on her "*Ashkenazi* appearance" to remain anonymous. Such "Ashkenazi" refers to European "white" origin. So sometimes she spoke Hebrew in Palestinian shops in Jaffa, trying not to be identified as Palestinian, because of the shopkeepers' nosiness about the personal affairs of young women like her. Rather than seeking recognition as a Jewish Israeli, this was an attempt to remain anonymous in the eyes of other Palestinians. This is different from *dissimulation*, which refers to members of marginalized groups that pretend to be members of a majority to ensure the survival of the group and its identity (Sözer 2014; Sachedina 2010; Kohlberg 1975; Virani 2011). Palestinian identity is not perceived to be under threat: individuals simply

realize that aspects of their identity, as an external "categorization" (Jenkins 2000), can limit their socio-economic possibilities and their mobility.

Queer Palestinian activism is often associated with struggles for recognition that see visibility as an important strategy (Ritchie 2010). In a similar vein, the Palestinian alternative music scene in Israel insists on making its ethno-national particularity visible (Karkabi 2013, 326). However, spaces of Palestinian nightlife and queer activism in Tel Aviv are often intentionally underground, one example being the regular club nights organized by al-Qaws, a civil society organization promoting gender and sexual diversity in Palestinian society. It supports a community of "individuals that are able to live and celebrate all layers of their identity" (al-Qaws homepage), opposing the idea that Tel Aviv offers "freedom" through assimilation.

Its parties regularly took place in a South Tel Aviv club hidden in a side street, and the young Palestinian Mahmud often joined.[4] Like most of the 300,000 Palestinians from East Jerusalem, he held an Israeli-issued "blue ID" that grants permanent resident status but not citizenship. This meant he could move around Israel and access jobs or education in ways that Palestinians living in the West Bank could not. Still living with his parents in a dense Palestinian East Jerusalem neighborhood, he carefully managed his visibility between there and Tel Aviv:

> The first thing I change when I move from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv are my clothes. I can't wear everything in Jerusalem. So I change my clothes in the car. If you look into my baggage, you will find all kinds of things there. My shoes, T-shirts, pants, jackets, make-up.

Although not cross-dressing, he put on make-up and wore different clothes in Tel Aviv from those he wore at home. The evening we met he wore a white jumper, a long silver necklace and tight trousers. Having a car was a convenience that enabled him to change appearances

between the two places and manage different kinds of in/visibility effectively. Not wanting to be recognized as gay in his East Jerusalem neighborhood, and not as Palestinian on the streets of Tel Aviv, he used tactics of invisibility to balance these two worlds and the associated desires for recognition. Sadly, concealing Palestinian identity was a common theme in Tel Aviv's nightlife because nightclub bouncers often prevented "Arabs" from coming in, which made spaces like the al-Qaws party all the more important.

The party usually ended relatively early so everyone could return home. Mahmud preferred to get back later at night, "so people don't see me," as he tends to "forget" himself in Tel Aviv. "Then I see I am already late, my parents are calling; then I have to change my clothes, have to take off my make-up…It's always hard to go back," he said. Mahmud's dilemma was that he could not be fully visible with his national identity *and* his sexual identity, neither in Tel Aviv nor in Jerusalem. The parties aim to reconcile this dilemma: "Imagine you are stressed all the time, you are hiding yourself, are not free. And when they do this party, you can do everything there, you can share your emotions," Mahmud explained. As a spatially immersed, yet hidden bubble, it symbolizes a rare convergence of otherwise contradictory worlds. Outside of the club's dancefloor, Palestinians in Tel Aviv must cope with recurring forms of discrimination and stigmatization.

Responses to stigmatization and immobilization

As the center of Israel's urban economy, Tel Aviv attracts a large number of Palestinian commuters. Commuting is often the only option open to indigenous populations in settler colonial economies, who lack employment opportunities in the peripheries they live in, and the economic capital to live in the city. This spatial inequality also defines Israel's territorial fracturing between a Jewish Israeli core and largely Palestinian peripheries (Yiftachel 2002). Consequently, many Palestinian citizens move in and out of the city. The software engineer

Faris, who worked in a technology start-up in Tel Aviv, experienced such commuting as discriminatory:

> Recently on the train, there were a lot of people around me. Then my phone rang and I picked it up, speaking in Arabic. They all stared at me and I felt how they went one step away from me. And when I approach the guard in front of the train station while talking Arabic on the phone, they always check me and ask questions. If I don't (speak Arabic), they don't.

As a preventive response, Faris avoided speaking Arabic at the station and on crowded trains or buses, which are often full of soldiers in uniform and subject to frequent security checks. A history of violence turned spotting "suspicious" people on buses into traits of good citizenship among Jewish Israelis (Pasquetti 2013). Tactics of invisibility help individuals evade discrimination and immobilization as they cross "thresholds" between social territories (Brighenti 2010).

For middle-class Palestinians, moving in and out of Tel Aviv also involves the airport, where security staff racially profile them routinely (Hasisi and Weisburd 2011; Shamir 2005). Such measures ensure the routinized identification of citizens, which helps states to control and to regulate mobility (Torpey 1998). One tactical response to that became evident when I approached the checkpoint at the airport's outer rim in a taxi with a friend, a former Tel Aviv University student. The guards looked into her vehicle and asked a few routine questions in Hebrew, especially: "Where did you just come from?" She answered in fluent Hebrew, "we came from Tel Aviv," which eased the way. On another occasion, however, she drove her sister to the airport, saying she had come from Umm el-Fahm, a Palestinian town in Israel. They had to step out of the car, which was searched thoroughly, and almost missed their flight after a heated dispute and lengthy interrogation.

Although protesting on site is always an option, passing unrecognized as a Palestinian avoids delay and is often more useful. Such tactical invisibility aids their social navigation within a "force field" – a rationalized regime of mobility – that moves or immobilizes people and influences their possibilities (Vigh 2009, 433; Baker 2016). Israel's mobility regime polices the movement and spatial access of Palestinian citizens on the basis of their identity, which is equally true *within* Tel Aviv. The Tel Aviv University student Dania recounts her experience:

> From what I wear, my accent, and in conversations (…), the guards at the gates of university always think I am not Arab. But recently they began to request student cards from everyone. They always said hello and were friendly. But when they see my card and my family name, they realize I am Arab and ask me to open my bag. But before it was as if I was VIP, no one expected that I am Arab.

The mobilizing effects of tactical invisibility ended with the request for Dania's ID card, which reveals her family name. "VIP" usually refers to mobile people with access to exclusive places. But here it suggests that being VIP means not being visibly Palestinian. Wherever possible, Palestinian citizens employ tactics of immersive invisibility to respond to discrimination and immobilization.

This logic of mobility-enhancing invisibility extends into the realm of the political economy more generally; from spatial into social mobility. This is particularly relevant given the aspirations of middle class Palestinians who seek professional success in Tel Aviv. In the face of recurring discrimination, some actively use tactics of invisibility and seek recognition as an unmarked equal individual. The hope is that Palestinian identity can become invisible as a disadvantaging trait, often by ways of education and hard work and the adoption of a liberal "meritocratic ideal" (Lamont et al. 2016, 265). Dania expressed her hope the following way: "I have to work harder by myself in order to catch up with the level of Jewish colleagues. I am

working hard so my marks will be higher than theirs and so I will stand out when I am looking for a job."

Dania hoped for a Tel Aviv that is "like New York or London, like cities where people won't look at me as an Arab, as if I was from another time or not modern." Yet as much as she tried to make this stigma invisible through exceptional success, she worried about not succeeding after all: "There are still difficulties. Maybe I will be in the same position as the Jewish classmate, even more exceptional, even on a higher scale, of better quality. (…) the fear is that despite all efforts I invest, they will prefer someone who went to the [Israeli] army."

Towards the end of our conversation at university, after speaking Arabic for an hour, Dania looked around and said that most Israeli students probably found it "strange" to hear her speak Arabic. On the other hand: "They often praise me, saying, 'You don't look Arab'. But for me that's not a compliment." The dilemma was that neither was truly satisfying: being stigmatized as a Palestinian, or being congratulated for being invisible as such.

To borrow in wording from Ghassan Hage, Tel Aviv "instils" in middle class Palestinian citizens the aspiration of universality (as an unmarked individual), but it "denies them this aspiration the very moment it encourages them to aspire to it and believe that they are entitled to it"; they have to "endure both the hope and the shattering of hope" as part of this process (Hage 2011, 121). A similar pattern is mirrored by three Palestinian citizens in Rabinowitz's monograph *Overlooking Nazareth* (1997, 184)*,* who were "champions of meritocracy, professionalism, hard work, universalistic pluralism, freedom of individual choice (…)." They gained distance from collective political issues in exchange for opportunities and success. According to Rabinowitz, "the bidding structure of Israeli liberalism" depoliticizes Palestinians. Frequent Israeli demands for Palestinians to be "good Arabs" follow this pattern – good Arabs are "moderates" who do not take nationalist positions and accord legitimacy to

Israel's existence and its actions (Cohen 2011, 3). "Good Arabs" are essentially invisible as Palestinians.

Overall, Palestinian citizens who seek social and spatial mobility are caught up in a stream of seemingly opposing currents. One of these necessitates the careful management of their visibility and another constantly pushes their Palestinian identity onto the surface. From the pragmatic standpoint of prioritizing mobility and agency over visible protest, the rationale appears to be along the lines of what Inas Said, a Palestinian entrepreneur in Israel, said about Palestinians in Tel Aviv: "It is a catch-22. Their only chance to find a job is to be individualistic. (…) As an Arab activist, of course I want them to have more rights. But on the other hand, I don't want to be the person causing them to lose the last opportunity they have." In a similar vein, Dania said: "I am not coming here to claim the rights of my land and so on. This will take place elsewhere."

The question remains whether the mundane tactics and aspirations of people who face severe restrictions on making visible collective claims nevertheless include claims, however subtle and invisible they are. Could not every position and access gained, or recognition achieved, become a stepping-stone for further claims? Indeed, some vulnerable people can only make gains through quiet "structural encroachments" that nevertheless challenge norms, even if not directly or openly (Bayat 2013, 18). A case in point are female Palestinian citizens who leave their home towns and immerse themselves into mixed Arab-Jewish cities such as Haifa, thereby achieving small-scale "micropolitical changes" with cumulative effects (Herzog 2009).

Meeting Dania in 2017, four years after our first conversation at university, it became evident that she had a sense of long-term achievement. "Maybe all this success happened because I always had this fear," said Dania, who now felt that she was finally in Tel Aviv "because it's a choice, not just a need. In the past it was a need and a question of access."

Looking back at the years since she started her studies, Dania added: "My parents always told me to be realistic, that I will go back to the village, and that I won't be accepted as an Arab in these firms in Tel Aviv." Numerous internships, skills trainings and jobs later, she felt ready to open up her own business in Tel Aviv, saying: "I was so scared that Jewish people will always be better and valued higher than me. But now I am setting the grades myself. All of this journey made me more confident in my career. I did a lot of things I didn't even like. *Now I am able to be me*."

Sometimes settler colonial cities require people to be visible as "someone else" for a while until they reach the position, confidence and aspiration that allows them to realize a new "me". Sometimes, one needs a long journey to arrive at home. For Palestinian citizens with high ambitions, Tel Aviv is such a journey. Stigmatization and fear of discrimination triggered a long uphill struggle in Dania. Yet it also led to a sense of emancipation and independence, however limited this may be. No matter how much Palestinians tried to evade discrimination, conflict and tension recurred in many daily situations: especially under the impact of violent conflict and nationalist polarization, their fragile balance often reached a tipping point.

Dangerously visible

In July 2014 I sat in a bustling Tel Aviv coffee shop with Yazid, a Palestinian citizen of Israel who studied nursing. Another round of fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip had escalated into a full-fledged conflict only days earlier. Between the Israeli bombardments of Gaza and militants' rocket fire into Israel, the war had toppled Palestinian citizens' fragile balance between their identity and immersion; between political solidarity and a daily life surrounded by Jewish Israeli society.

"Israelis usually don't confront me with their opinions, but now it all comes out," said Yazid about the impact of violence and polarization. We had just begun talking when the sound of the city's alarm siren interrupted us. The waiters hectically guided customers into a nearby

residential building for shelter. As the wailing siren saturated the city, Yazid and I stood quietly without uttering a word – especially not in Arabic – until we heard the dull sound of an explosion, indicating that the rocket was intercepted above the city. As if it was all part of a planned choreography, the city returned to business as usual as quickly as it had sought shelter a minute before.

Beyond this routinized surface, the impact of conflict and violence cast a sharp shadow over the city and the Palestinians within it. On the one hand, invisibility had become more urgent; on the other, much more difficult to bare. "I am afraid to talk Arabic now," said Towibah, who worked for an NGO in downtown Tel Aviv, as we walked across a public square during the conflict. She added: "I reached a point where I prefer to talk in English instead of Arabic. I feel I am in danger." These fears were not unjustified in the face of inciting speech by Israeli politicians and mobs of violent nationalists, one of which attacked the 31 year-old Wasseem and his friend on their way to an anti-war event in Haifa, where Palestinian citizens staged visible protests. "We spoke Arabic on our way to the demonstration and some guys came over, shouting 'Death to Arabs'," he told me on the phone after the attack. "They were screaming terrible things. I think they wanted to kill us." They got away with a broken nose and minor injuries, but such stories spread quickly among Palestinians living in Tel Aviv. Their immersive invisibility became a source of protection for Towibah and other "lone" Palestinian individuals in this Israeli city.

While the hearts of most Palestinians in Israel were beating for the victims of Israeli bombardments in Gaza, most Jewish citizens around them praised the very soldiers they disdained. Regular rocket alarm sirens intensified this tension and some Palestinians were not sure what to fear more, the incoming rockets fired by Palestinians in Gaza, or the often agitated Israelis they shared the shelter with. This had consequences for how safe it was to be publically recognized as a Palestinian.

Sami Abu Shahade, a former City Council member, faced one rocket alarm siren in 2014 while shopping in a mall outside Tel Aviv with his children. Instead of joining others in the shelter, he decided to run "the other way," fearing that others might confront them if they spoke Arabic. The dilemma many now faced was that simultaneous to the growing pressure on them to keep a low profile, they felt a growing desire to speak up. "It's so bad. I feel that I can't stand the Jewish Israeli society anymore. I can't listen to them anymore. Not because of the Hebrew, but because of what they say, their conversations," said Towibah.

Whatever peak the Gaza-Conflict may have marked in terms of intensity, it was only a more spectacular version of the recurring pressures on Palestinian citizens to be invisible. The NGO worker Zahie from Jaffa once worked as a waitress in a shopping center. One day her manager hastily removed her name tag because it identified her as an Arab, after a suicide bombing outside the center that killed 13 people. As groups of Israelis began to gather in rage outside, shouting "death to Arabs," Palestinian citizens were only safe if invisible as "Arabs."

At that time, Zahie did not yet wear a Muslim headscarf, or *hijab*, which is why removing the name-tag sufficed. But for women who wear the hijab in Tel Aviv, invisibility as a Palestinian was often impossible. According to Safa, who heads the NGO Zahie worked for, which supports Palestinian women from Jaffa to find jobs in Tel Aviv, many are scared of being attacked there. "There are also fears about being looked at, that they are not good enough in Hebrew, that they are wearing the veil and that it would be strange," said Safa. Because many of these women do not fit into the image of outgoing "liberal" Tel Aviv, the only jobs they find are often in cleaning, hidden away in private residences or buildings. The capacity to control one's visibility is tied up with such differences in gender, appearance, and class.

Yet even for those who can otherwise use immersive invisibility, its empowering effects are limited during "times of adversity" (Kohlberg 1975, 395). These times do not only include violent conflict, but also Israeli memorial days and the "Day of Remembrance for the Fallen

Soldiers of Israel and Victims of Terrorism." Its country-wide siren calls upon citizens to commemorate in silence. People answer this call by stopping their cars on the highway to step outside, by standing up in trains, offices, or classrooms. It is an all-embracing national ritual that troubles Palestinians and their visibility: do they stand up with the masses to blend in and retain ethno-national anonymity, but swallowing anger and frustration, or do they stay seated and drive on when all others stop and stand up, thus making their opposition visible?

As the siren tries to synchronize everyone in the country, it expresses ideology as a force that "interpellates" or hails concrete individuals as concrete subjects (Althusser 2000; Handelman 1998). It demands from people to identify themselves as supportive or resistant, synchronized or asynchronous. The actor and musician Mira Awad told me during one such Remembrance Day that it was similar to open conflict:

> Everybody is in tension. When you say something, they feel like you are attacking their own heritage and history. (…) Everybody is so over-sensitive, but also Palestinians are over-sensitive. A million and a half Palestinians inside Israel make a big effort not to be outside when the siren goes off. (…) We have a problem with the memorial of soldiers because we feel it is one-sided. So we don't go outside. It is painful because we don't get the same recognition.

Overtly confronting Israelis during this ritual requires courage, but neither leads to more recognition, nor to less frustration. And so instead of protesting, most Palestinians in Tel Aviv hide when the siren wails. This political ritual weaves the wider context of Palestinian non-recognition in Tel Aviv into micro-strategies of invisibility, whereby a lack of overall recognition makes invisibility both more necessary and more painful to endure. Many Palestinians in Israel would agree that taking off necklaces at work, or deliberately not speaking Arabic to security guards, was not a politically problematic move. But standing up

for a nationalist Israeli ritual was different. Not showing something was one thing, but showing political support for Israel was quite another.

At least within their private sphere, some Palestinian citizens managed to arrange themselves, as did one man who lived with a Jewish boyfriend in Tel Aviv, saying: "I didn't stand up when the siren wailed, but my boyfriend decided to go to the bathroom and commemorate there. He said, 'I know you are Arab'. So it was ok that I stayed outside and didn't stand up." Some relationships, at least, seemed to reconcile the rigid difference settler colonialism inscribes into Arab-Jewish relations, despite high levels of tension.

However, Palestinian non-citizens from the occupied West Bank have little freedom for such negotiations. As a restrictive regime confines them to another dimension of the city "underground," they cannot move around freely, study at Israeli universities, or take part in Tel Aviv's urban middle class lifestyle. While the main research behind this paper in 2013/2014 focused on Palestinian *citizens*, it also involved research among some Palestinian workers from the West Bank; and a related research project in 2017 focused explicitly on the world of these Palestinian labor commuters. It seems important to delineate the limitations of immersive invisibility with the dull reality of some 120.000 laborers from the West Bank who worked in Israel proper or in settlements by 2017 (ILO 2017). At least 35.000 laborers had no working permits at all and were smuggled into Israel where they lived underground in order to avoid detention and fines. Invisibility gains a different connotation here, as one worker in Tel Aviv explained: "I can't walk wherever I want. I won't go to the beach, it's too risky. If I don't have work, I stay inside the mosque, where I feel safe." To them, visibility is always "dangerously visible."

While moments of crises are recurring for Palestinian citizens of Israel, the Palestinian labor force in Israel is in and by itself constructed as a crisis: a "living emergency" and a dangerous population (Berda 2018). This enforces indivisibility through categorical exclusion, rather than

utilizing it for proactive urban immersion. Taking necklaces off will not reduce their waiting time at checkpoints, and situational tactics are unlikely to translate into improved positions that facilitate social upward mobility.

Against this contrasting backdrop, the urban immersion of middle class Palestinian citizens reveals that seemingly universal categories of citizenship, success, mobility, and anonymity are highly contingent and conditional. This middle-class perspective complements dominant approaches that focus on the urban poor, their struggles, and their disempowering urban inclusion through a "politics of limited entitlements" (Di Nunzio 2017; Bayat 1996). Although middle-class Palestinian citizens turn temporary immersion into successes, recurring conflict, nationalist events, and political tension easily upturn the fragile balance they establish between such immersion and their identity. Ultimately, these flaws in middle-class urban citizenship mark the upper limits of their national citizenship; immersive invisibility reveals the hidden parameters of conditional minority citizenship.

Invisibility as exile

Settler colonial nations often shape cities in opposition to indigenous identity, thereby enclosing the settler majority in an exclusive space. Ongoing ethno-national conflict can mean that members of the majority further stigmatize minorities as potentially threatening Others. At the same time, neoliberal urban centres and their demand for labour act as a centripetal force that attracts indigenous citizens from economically marginalized peripheries. Through this process, historically shaped patterns of exclusion gradually become entangled with market forces and urban lifestyles that offer conditional pathways to temporary immersion and social mobility. Overt ethno-national exclusion transforms into a covert space of conditional immersion.

Yet immersive invisibility is also a powerful resource. It is one effective way of accessing "the 'neoliberal city' under the illiberal state" (Bayat 2012). Can immersion into the neoliberal city escape "illiberal" exclusion? The dilemma is that compliance with the *terms* of "neoliberal" urban immersion – depoliticized individualism, civility, and de-collectivization – eventually serves the illiberal logic at the same time as it pierces its outer shell: the desire to be an anonymous and unmarked individual goes hand in hand with the pressure to remain invisible within a settler colonial city. Instead of overcoming categorical difference and racialized exclusion, as is often assumed, urban neoliberalism and civility ultimately strengthen its grip. Close ethnographic attention to tactics of immersive invisibility reveals the affinity and interdependence between neoliberal and settler colonial politics of inclusion and exclusion.

In its dual effects, immersive invisibility also undermines in-group networking because camouflage no longer works once visible collectives are formed. This hints at the important difference between immersion and urban inclusion: one can be immersed as a camouflaged outsider, but not permanently included as one. Immersion does not represent urban citizenship or an enhanced "right to the city," which would involve more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: "a right to change ourselves by changing the city;" a common rather than an individual right that depends on collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization (Harvey 2008, 23).

Despite remaining an individual project, immersive invisibility appears to enable long-term socio-economic advantages and accords individuals some forms of apolitical recognition. This has implications for dominant approaches to (urban) minority struggles in neoliberal and settler colonial contexts, which are often portrayed in terms of visible "resistance" (Rabinowitz 2014; Gagné and Trépied 2016) or as a "battle for visibility" (Feldman 2008).

Although immersive invisibility hardly transforms the conditional parameters that limit urban citizenship, it can determine how much one can achieve within existing parameters.

Two of this article's central characters, Hisham and Dania, are cases in point. The student Hisham, who censored political visibility in return for internships in Tel Aviv law offices, benefitted from temporary immersion in the long run: another internship and about two years later, he co-founded his own law firm in Nazareth, the largest Palestinian town in Israel. It self-consciously advertised in Arabic on Facebook and catered to Palestinian clients, capitalizing on the skills and networks Hisham had acquired in Tel Aviv. Dania's fearful "journey" through Tel Aviv's discriminatory employment market eventually led to greater self-confidence, and as she put it, allowed her to realize a new "me" that was ready to transform the gained experience into her own business startup. These individual achievements may represent a transformative "alter-politics" that lies outside the dominant political imaginary (Hage 2015).

Moreover, immersive invisibility allows stigmatized individuals to negotiate the multiple, often contradictory aspects of their lives and the associated claims for recognition beyond a politics of "difference": recognition of their gender or sexual identity, as successful professionals, or as unmarked individuals. The double bind of settler colonial urbanism means that the visibility of one aspect of identity often requires invisibility of another. In this sense, tactics of immersive invisibility help people negotiate the ambivalence between identity politics, for which justice would require recognition, and class politics, for which justice requires economic redistribution (Sylvain 2014, 253; Fraser 2003).

The dilemma is that invisible immersion into the settler colonial–neoliberal city only unlocks social and economic opportunities at the expense of ethno-national recognition; class politics and identity politics thus become mutually exclusive. It is true that multicultural legacies of classic settler colonial states, such as Australia, also perpetuate the inherited

unequal systems they claim to overcome (Povinelli 2002). However, they make inclusion and recognition of the colonized conditional on their fulfillment of authentic standards of traditional indigenous identity. Immersive invisibility does the opposite: it seeks to neutralize "authenticity," rather than multiculturalism, in response to exclusive ethno-national liberalism.

Such urban "ethno-liberalism" inscribes a logic of settler colonial "supersession" – that is, the displacement of indigenous peoples and their replacement with urban settler space – into the neoliberal dimension of a city, while an ongoing and unresolved ethno-national conflict undermines any attempt at a multicultural politics that would encompass indigenous citizens. Categorical exclusion from urban citizenship and individual self-regulation eventually develop a colonial-liberal affinity that is mutually reinforcing. Immersive invisibility thus becomes a space of continuing exile, a displaced state of in-between that is "sometimes chosen, sometimes not" (Hobbs 2014, 4). This exile symbolizes both resource and impotence, opportunity and entrapment: it is simultaneously imposed on people and adopted by them.

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[1] All names are real names unless indicated otherwise.

[2] The tour was organized by Zochrot, an NGO that raises awareness about the Nakba in Israeli society and among Palestinians in Israel.

[3] Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) counted only 18,500 "Arabs" in the greater Tel Aviv area, but about 15,000 of these were registered residents of Arab neighbourhoods in

Jaffa. Although there are numbers for Arab students at Tel Aviv University, these are often not registered residents.

[4] Not a real name.