

# The Jewish Cemetery of Saida

## Cleaning and Renovation Project

Progress Report 01

29 October 2018

### The Team

Jean-Pierre Zahar, architect and site manager (working pro-bono), supported by Nagi Zeidan, site assistant. The sponsor is Ishac Diwan (New York) and his family, supported by an ad-hoc committee representing Jewish families from Saida including for the moment: Albert N. Barzilay (São Paulo); Marc Hadid (Montréal); Isaac Khodri (London); Nissim Levy (France); Albert Nigri (Geneva); and Yolla Politi (France).

### Overview

The cemetery has been neglected since the 1980s; the year that marks the departure of the last Jewish families from Saida, and subject to numerous acts of aggression over the years.

A visit by the Diwan family in 2014 initiated a project to build a wall to encircle and protect the grounds of the cemetery. The company *Emar Al-Janoub For Contracting* was put in charge of the execution of the wall in 2015 (about 600 meters long and 2.5 meters high) - see figure 4.

Despite the construction of the wall, the cemetery continued to be used by some local residents as a dumping site and open to theft of sand (which has been ongoing for many years). The main gate (north of the cemetery) adjoining an industrial area was regularly broken down, and much of the ground of the cemetery continued to be used as an extension of the adjacent industrial zone, including for drying wool and dumping toxic waste from chemical tanning processes (figure 3). Several complaints were filed, to no avail.

In May 2018, part of the western wall was breached by the *Khoury Construction* company during the laying of sewer pipes under the new avenue adjacent to the cemetery. The breaches have since been closed by the same company (figure 6). Due to an outcry over this affair, the company and the mayor of the city even offered to do more.

During the first visit with Zahar on July 25, 2018, the cemetery was in a dismal state; it was clear that the location of the main gate to the north was its weakest link. Diwan therefore asked *Khoury Construction* to transfer the north gate to the south, and to separate the cemetery from the industrial zone by a wall. The dynamic support of the mayor of the city, Mohammad Al-Saoudi, who sent the police to force the intruders to leave the premises was

crucial. The engineer Bassam Kojok of the *Khoury Construction* company was a great help. The lawyer of the Jewish community of Lebanon, Bassem El-Hout, offered judicious advice.

### **Project components**

1. The complete cleaning of the site;
2. The survey of visible graves;
3. A deep cleaning of a part of the cemetery, including the sifting and cleaning of the surface sand, exposing hidden graves, and repair of damaged graves;
4. The preparation of a redevelopment plan for the destroyed dune on the west side of the cemetery and a reflection on the landscaping of the grounds of the cemetery.

### **Launch of the project**

The work began on September 5th and ended on November 1, 2018. Zahar spent a few hours a day to provide instructions to the team (he was in charge of the rehabilitation of the Greek-Orthodox cemetery in Saida, which at some point was also in a very degraded state). The work was carried out by a team of 4 to 6 workers. Zeidan devoted himself completely to the supervision of the daily work, travelling from Wadi Chahrour (Mount Lebanon) to be on the site every day from 7:30 AM to 4:00 PM. Samer Ladki, an experienced amateur photographer, also joined the team.

A basic cleaning on the entire cemetery was done, including:

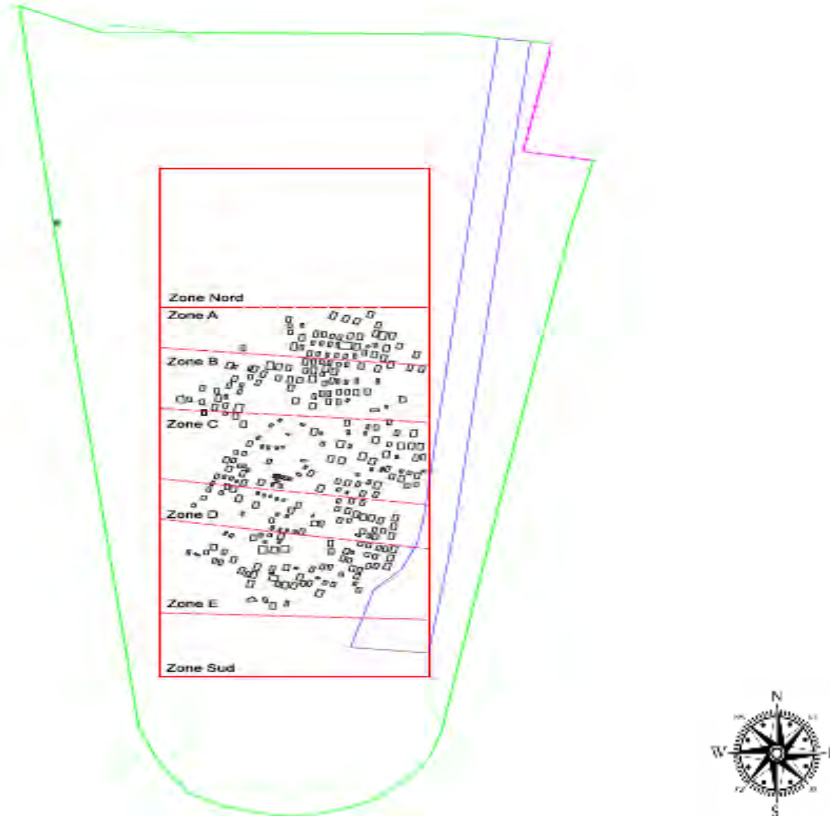
1. Clearing and pruning dead trees, weeds, and reeds,
2. Removal of garbage on the surface, and
3. Removal of sheep wools, animal bones, and fishermen crates.

All organic materials that are safe for the environment were burned on the site. All the rest has been filled in sacks and will be transferred to the Sainiq sorting plant in Saida (by special permission from the Mayor of Saida).

### **Work in progress (2018 campaign)**

#### *Zone E*

In the burial areas, the territory has been subdivided into five zones or working areas (zone A to E - see figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Map and delineation of areas (by Youssef Mohsin, 2016). The walls of the cemetery are green. The blue line indicates the road. The red line indicates the burial area. The coast is on the left (west), the new gate is in the extension of the road south of the site. The pink zone is occupied by a small building of Electricité du Liban.

After a few days of work, a decision was taken to focus on Zone E for a deep cleaning during this first season of 2018, because it seemed to be dirtier and in worse shape than the other zones. Zone E contains part of the Cohanim section, and a group of acacias (figure 8).

The work in Zone E has been rich in lessons. It revealed the existence of 25 to 30 cm of organic waste, above the sea sand (the dune), which is the original base of the cemetery (see for example, photos s and t). This top layer includes organic material, mixed with waste and garbage accumulated during the last 50 years of neglect.

Many stelae in this zone, like in the rest of the cemetery, are missing. Some seem very old, others have been vandalized. The question is whether most of these were torn off and stolen, or broken with the remains still on the spot. The discovery of many broken stelae in the organic layer suggests that the second hypothesis holds, at least for some of the stelae.

The work done has reached about two thirds of area E, and can be described as follows:

1. Deep cleaning with sand removal to the burial base, more or less 25 cm from the actual ground, with screening of the sand around each grave, and redistribution of the clean sand around the cleaned areas;
2. Search for hidden tombs at the dune level (without digging deeper);
3. Repositioning inverted gravestones where possible, and
4. Assembling iconographic or other objects in individual bags.

A multitude of objects have been found, recent and not so recent (in addition to broken stelae), which attest to the diversity of visitors to the cemetery over the years (soldiers, fedayeen, refugees, drug addicts, and others). Other than that, there are also a lot of ancient pottery shards (probably from Roman times). The pieces of broken stelae were organized in numbered bags. We plan to store them in a container that we would install very soon on the site. Interested families might try to have broken stelae repaired. Already, the patient work of Zeidan has allowed to reconstruct partially several marbles in zone E, and to show what is possible to do in the future (figure 9).

The ruins of the funeral home (dedicated to the preparation of the body of the dead and where the guardian of the cemetery lived) intact in 1982 (according to photographs taken at that time) were cleared. This revealed several tombs that were not visible, as well as a well of underground water (from which appeared a serpent of 2.5 meters long, which was killed by the workers).

### ***The dune to the west and east of the site***

The cemetery site is an old massive sand dune. Old aerial photos show the extent of the dune in the 1930s. The dune has been significantly reduced on the west side due to the decades-long sand stealing, which has intensified in recent years.

It was decided to thoroughly clean the **dune to the east**, given its disastrous state due to garbage thrown off the road, and wool stored by the nearby leather factory for years. The work included garbage removal and disposal, tree pruning, removal of concrete blocks, cleaning and screening of 20cm of sand, and stabilization of the dune (photos i to p).

Having suffered from the illegal stealing of sand over the years, **the west of the site** has collapsed over almost the entire length of the site damaging nearby burial zones. About ten tombs have collapsed (to the west), and some have been disemboweled (photo q). **Tombs in the vicinity (about twenty) risk collapse if the area is not stabilized soon.** The sand stealing unfortunately exposed some bones, so we covered part of the dune with a large tarpaulin (see photo r) while waiting to receive a permit from the DGA (Directorate General of Antiquities) to intervene on the dune.

The western dune is on a major archaeological area. According to the French archaeologist Maurice Dunand, the Jewish tombs that “all appear on the surface, in the recent sand dune” are part of the vast necropolis of ancient Sidon. This “must extend to the south, and west to the shore, below the current Jewish cemetery.”<sup>1</sup> This area of great historical value has undergone a drastic change in view of the removal of sand over the years. Some remains of large antique jars were found broken on this part. Because of this, we contacted the DGA to have the premises inspected.

### **A first assessment of the cemetery**

In the first count, there are **just under 400 visible tombs** in the cemetery, all of which are identified on the map (figure 1). Among these, nearly half have their stelae damaged in part or totally. The photo project (see below) will establish a precise count.

In part of Zone E, where the work was done in depth, there were as many hidden tombs (under 25 cm of sand) as visible tombs. This suggests that many more tombs will be discovered in the coming years as rehabilitation works progress.

The age of the cemetery remains to be determined. In Ernest Renan's 1860/1 maps, published in 1864 (*The Phenicia Mission*), the “Israelite Cemetery,” which corresponds to the area of the present cemetery site, is mentioned with signs of several graves (figure 2). In addition, a document from the Politi archive proves that in 1868, the date of the purchase of an annexed land, the cemetery was already there.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Dunand, “Rapport sur les fouilles de Sidon en 1967-1968,” *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth* 22 (January 1, 1969): 103.



**Figure 2.** Map LXVI. “Number 17” in the legend refers to the "Israelite cemetery" which sits on the dune very clearly. Source: Ernest Renan, *Mission de Phénicie. Planches* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1864).

The tombs are of various styles, but do not resemble the graves of the Jewish cemetery in Beirut. There seems to be three quite distinct styles of tombs, with variations that depend on families:

1. Graves of 2 or 3 floors (for example, photo t)
2. Graves with parts of Roman columns (photo s)
3. Tombs at ground level, potentially the oldest, and generally without inscriptions (photo t).

### Surface analysis

It would be important to regularize the legal status of the cemetery soon. A rough analysis of the surfaces, from the map drawn by the cartographer Youssef Mohsin, reveals the following:

- On the land certificate, the area of parcel 386 is 20,512 m<sup>2</sup> (and it is formally the property of a wakf called in Arabic *Madāfin al-Ṭāifa al-Mūsawiyya fī Ṣaydā*—literally, Cemeteries of the Mussawite community of Saida).
- After expropriation for the construction of motorways, the area has become 14,300 m<sup>2</sup>.
- The current land within the constructed walls is 16,037 m<sup>2</sup> (see green line in figure 1).

### Photo Project and web-site

All the stelae are being photographed by Ladki, after cleaning each stela, so that all the details are clearly visible (and with a unique number that corresponds to them on the Autocad map).

These data are being deciphered by a team that Barzilay has assembled in Brazil. The result will be an Excel file with the details of each burial (name, year of death, condition of the grave, etc.). We then propose to post the results on a website - so that interested families can consult them.

For now, a Dropbox related to the project has been created. This dropbox contains:

1. The photos of the site during the visits (by Zahar)
2. The photos of each stela (by Ladki)
3. Some partially reconstituted stellas (by Zeidan)
4. The information extracted from these stelae (by Barzilay)
5. The operational budget
6. An archive of new and old maps, old photographs, and other documents of the Politi archive referring to the cemetery - to which can be added testimonies collected from the community around the world.

### **Future plans**

It is important in the coming weeks to buy and place a container on the site in order to store the pieces of stelae discovered. To ensure the safety of the cemetery, it will be necessary to raise the wall (on the north side) and to add additional precautions. Ideally, a guardian should be hired (as it is the case in all other cemeteries in Saida).

It is urgent to develop a rescue plan for the dune (and to rehabilitate the collapsed tombs), and to execute this plan as soon as practicable. In view of the very high archaeological value of the site, an official request has been submitted to the DGA, as work beyond the surface will need to be supervised by a designated archaeologist, as per Lebanese law. The dune reconstruction project should ideally be part of a broader landscaping project. The rest of the cemetery (besides zone E) will also need to be thoroughly cleaned in the future, including surface sand screening, clearing hidden tombs, tombs repair.

### **Budget**

The work on the site for this year ends at the end of October. Expenditures for the months of September and October amounted to US \$10,000 (salaries, equipment, and services). The fees have been paid so far by members of the ad-hoc committee.

We are looking for more funding to c strengthen the walls, instal a new gate, buy and install a container on site, construct a website, and develop architectural plans for the work on the western dune. The total cost is estimated at US \$25,000. We propose to create in the near future a non-profit association in France to facilitate contributions. In the meanwhile, contributions will be managed by the members of the ad-hoc committee.

The costs of the rebuilding the Western dune, the in-depth cleaning of the rest of the cemetery, and landscaping work will be more substantial, of the order of US \$250,000 (a more precise estimate will be made when an action plan is finalized).



**ANNEX**



a.



b.





C.

**Figure 3.** Before the start of the work. Photo a, 2014. Photos b-c, June 2017.



d.



e.

**Figure 4.** Construction of the wall in 2015.



f.



g.





h.



i.



j.



k.



l.



m.



n.



o.



p.

**Figure 5.** After the beginning of the work (photos f-p), Septiembre-October 2018.





**Figure 6.** General view of the cemetery and the dune, oriented towards the south, October 2018. On the right, one can see the transformation of the mountain of rubbish, which the city is developing into a public park.



q.



r.

**Figure 7.** Overall view of the western part of the sand dune, with the fallen tombs (photo q), October 2018. Installation of the tarpaulin covering the exposed parts of the embankment (photo r), October 2018.



s.



t.





u.



v.



W.

**Figure 8.** Zone E (photos s-w), October 2018.





x.



y.



z.

**Figure 9.** Reconstitution of a marble plaque (photos x-z), September 2018.