The old village of Umm Qays, Jordan, is strategically located to the south of the Golan Heights, overlooking the northern part of the Jordan Valley and the southern shore of Lake Tiberias. Biblical Gadara and subsequently one of the cities of the Decapolis in antiquity, it attracts modest numbers of both foreign and Jordanian tourists. From the mid-twentieth century on, Umm Qays residents increasingly abandoned farming for work in the civil service and the army, and a new village began to develop adjacent to the original village.

In the mid-1960s, when a team from the German Protestant Institute in Amman began excavating the site, the most recent installment in the reshaping of the village’s landscape and history began. Over the last four decades, the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA), in conjunction with a series of outside actors, from the German Foreign Ministry and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to Amman-based investors, has transformed the physical contours, social composition and economy of the village. The story of Umm Qays is a clear example of two common development problems: insufficient or ineffective state responsiveness to those displaced by development; and the continuing struggle of local communities to make their voices heard.

When the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities decided to excavate ancient ruins near the village of Umm Qays, the villagers had to move. The story of Umm Qays illustrates two common development problems: insufficient or ineffective state responsiveness to those displaced by development, and the continuing struggle of local communities to make their voices heard.

The Beginnings of Excavations

Periodic Israeli shelling of northern Jordan after the 1967 war led to a virtual suspension of archaeological work on Umm Qays. The Jordanian defeat of the remnants of the Palestinian resistance movement in the summer of 1971 ended the cross-border shelling, and work on the site returned to normal. In 1974, anticipating further excavations, the government sequestered a total of 450 dunums located on and near the site of the ancient city, including the old village, most of whose houses date to the early amirate period. It was not clear at the time what direction the German excavations would take, and there was concern that the continued inhabitation of the old village site was damaging the remains beneath it. It made financial sense to the government to buy the huge area at "today’s prices" rather than to sequester the land incrementally. Since Jordan was then under martial law, there was no question of the villagers opposing the sequestration order. The only matter open to discussion was the amount of compensation.¹

Compensation and Resettlement

In 1976 a survey was conducted to determine exact ownership in the village and the levels of compensation. Prices were set for houses, trees, wells and the like, depending upon size, age and other factors.² According to interviewees, the

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villagers felt at the time that the compensation levels were fair. Moreover, the government decree stipulated that people did not have to leave their houses immediately (and in fact one man stayed until his death in 1992). Nevertheless, villagers were forbidden to make any improvements on their property.

Had the government paid the compensation immediately, this story might have ended quite differently. However, for reasons still unclear, it delayed. By the time the compensation was forwarded in 1982, inflation had soared, leading the villagers to deem the original sums unfair. A group of them wrote a letter of complaint and circulated it to other residents who had also been negatively affected. The letter was then sent to the local governor *(al-bakim al-idari)*. However, it appears it was a Jordan TV program spotlighting the problems that finally triggered state action: a 50 percent upward revaluation of the property. Nevertheless, the delays and the general lack of concern by the authorities left the villagers angered.

When the government did pay the compensation, it was reportedly worried that the villagers would simply take their money and move elsewhere. Hence, it proposed an alternative housing project to be carried out by the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDC, *Mu’assasat al-Iskan wa al-Tatwir al-Hadari*). Two different structure sizes were available, costing 12,000 and 7,500 Jordanian dinars (JDs), respectively. For those who could not afford to pay in cash but could secure a 10 percent down payment, 25-year loans (with 7–10 percent interest rates) were available.

But financing was only one problem. The structures, apparently designed by people unfamiliar or unconcerned with peasant family needs, were inappropriate: the rooms were too small, the total space was insufficient for large and extended families and there were no accommodations for animals. Worse, when the houses were completed, the prospective owners learned that the prices they agreed on were only for the structures—purchasing the land would double the expected price. As a result, some villagers could no longer afford the housing (although as things stood, only 150 units had been built, despite the displacement of 300 families). In the end, those who had sufficient money as well as those who had no other option took the housing. Finding alternative land on which to build that also had access to services was very difficult—very few such pieces of land remained. The villagers felt they had once again been badly misled and mistreated (if not cheated) by the government. Subsequently a new 88-unit project, Umm Qays II, was proposed. This time only the land and infrastructure were provided, and not the actual housing. Here, housing priority went first to those who were hurt by the original sequestration, then other villagers, followed by government employees with limited income.

Gradually, the old village’s houses—some of which were magnificent examples of the architecture of the period—were abandoned. Their gradual deterioration owned, not to excavations, but to the elements. Thus ended the first installment in the transformation of the old village.
Restoring Village Structures

The only real institutional interest in the decaying village came from a team from Yarmuk University’s Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology, which in the mid-1980s began to document as much as possible of the gradually disappearing material history of Umm Qays. Then came an about-face in the form of a proposal to restore a structure in the old village. The idea originated with the director of the German Institute, Thomas Weber, whose predecessor had been involved with the Yarmuk team’s documentation project. It became clear that the excavations were not moving in the direction of the old village; hence the dig posed no threat to the structures.

In one of Umm Qays’ leading families, the Malkawis, with the intention of using it as a dig house for the German archaeological team. The proposal was forwarded to the German Foreign Ministry, which approved and completely funded the project at a total cost of JD 10,000 ($30,000). Most of these funds reportedly went for the labor of local residents. Indeed, Khammash claims that he went to great length to involve the locals, although there is substantial evidence that the locals never felt they were a part of the project, nor that they had a stake in it.

The next restoration project was the house owned by another leading family, the Rusans. The idea was to convert the house into a museum to display the archaeological finds produced by the excavations. Khammash was the architect of choice and the money came from the Germans, although this time the project was administered by the American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR), a center in Amman specializing in archaeological projects and research. Again, at least officially, great emphasis was placed on the use of local materials and labor so that the local communities would benefit financially.

The next proposal was for a rest house in the old village. A government rest house outside of Umm Qays on the road to al-Himmah had been built in the 1980s. According to one version of the story, the government had sought in vain someone from Umm Qays to run it. Failing that, the rest house fell into disrepair. In 1990 work began on a new rest house, using a former school on the edge of the old village. With a spectacular view of Lake Tiberias and the Golan, it was built in “traditional Jordanian style.”

The rest house project was a USAID and MOTA endeavor, and it was to be turned over to private sector management. After the rest house’s completion in 1992, a prominent businessman and restaurateur, Zaid Qsus, who was based in Amman but had no ties to Umm Qays, won the concession to manage it.

The people of Umm Qays are convinced that members of Amman’s political and economic elite had advance knowledge that peace with Israel was coming, and hence anticipated that Umm Qays would be a good investment. Their suspicions derive from long-standing distrust of Amman and its representatives and from the way they had been treated by the government over the past decades. Villagers’ animosities and management by outsiders have led to an almost total separation between the rest house’s activities and the surrounding village and its residents. Aside from a handful of jobs, the economic impact of the rest house on the village has been minimal.

Rest(oy)ing the Village

Like many others familiar with the site, rest house manager Qsus watched with dismay the continuing decay of the old village, and in 1993 he proposed restoring many of the remaining old houses en masse to create a village-hotel resort.

It is interesting and perhaps instructive that the feasibility study for the tourist village project clearly misrepresents Umm Qays’s recent history, claiming that it “was recently deserted.” The document makes no mention of the sequestration episode. In an interview with a top MOTA official about ongoing tourism development projects, my interlocutor repeated the same story of “village abandonment,” as if the residents of the old village had simply left the village of their own accord. The story of the village is thus perverted, and offers disturbing echoes of the rewriting of the histories of “abandoned villages” in Palestine following the 1948 war. No doubt to defend the resort project against protests from preservationists and others, Qsus argues that the project will seek to revive the original feeling of a village, so the guest can experience “authentic” village life. He also insists that he wants to employ villagers, perhaps in stores or workshops at the resort. Instead, what has been proposed is a dehistoricized, essentialized and sanitized version of “traditional” village life for the consumption of foreign and domestic tourists. The former owners of the houses would serve as local color, objects rather than real actors in this “village’s” story.

Many of the older villagers still relate to the sequestered structures as “their houses.” Thus the Qsus project reinforces their sense of having been treated unjustly by the state. They understand that outsiders are preventing them from significantly benefiting from a potential gold mine. The feelings of having been cheated are exacerbated by the fact that their houses and lands were sequestered for “archaeological purposes,” according to the original government decree. Therefore, in order to proceed with the resort project, Qsus and his investment partners must have the sequestration order amended to include “tourism” as a purpose. According to Qsus, this was not going to be a problem at all, but the Umm Qays residents have engaged a lawyer and are ready to file a lawsuit should the order be so amended.

Former Minister of Tourism Abd al-Llah al-Khatib felt that the locals had a right to go to court to fight the change in the sequestration order, but also felt that outsiders had played a major role in encouraging people to complain and oppose the project.

Qsus claims that he has a problem only with a small minority of the locals, and that he has been working on improving relations. He argues that Umm Qays does not have
much of an economic future without tourism, and that, in any event, the people will not get their houses back.14 Locals repeatedly express an interest in investing, but say the state and its wealthy private sector allies stand as obstacles. They do not mention their unfortunate lack of capital and expertise, which are serious impediments to investing. Nor are the villagers unified in their approach to the Qsus project. Some prefer to try to benefit from any tourism development carried out by outsiders, while others want to hold out to try to make their own role in the development of the site more prominent.

The amount Qsus pays the government for the rest house suggests that he has powerful friends in high places. His annual rent is only JD 1,000 a year ($1,500), and the government is requesting only JD 4,800 ($7,200) a year for the village-resort, if and when it should materialize.15 The villagers consider these arrangements outrageous. However, both Qsus and the locals agree that the royal family is keen on further development of Umm Qays, including support by some for the proposed tourist village. Various family members, including Zayd bin Shakir and the late King Hussein in particular, tie them to the royal family, and writing its story. To date, the state, external agencies and the private sector have done more to disfigure than to develop Umm Qays.

In 1998 Qsus insisted that the continuing delay was due to minor disagreements, but did not elaborate. By 1999 it was clear that the project was on hold because of the activism of some of the locals. Some, like Qsus, argue it is a small minority. Nonetheless, this minority is organized through the local chapter of the Friends of Archaeology, an Amman-based NGO whose local chapter president, Talib Rusan, comes from a leading Umm Qays family.16 Spring 1999 heralded several discussions about the future of the proposed project, including some unpleasant exchanges between Minister of Tourism Baltaji and the locals. The fact that Rusan was elected mayor of Umm Qays in July 1999 suggested that high-profile opposition to the project would continue. A press report at the end of August 1999 indicated that, at least from the MOTA perspective, a tourist resort project in Umm Qays was still very much alive. Another article in mid-September indicated that the villagers were also still ready to fight.19 As of summer 2000, the project remained a mere plan on paper.

Meanwhile, the village has been rocked by ups and downs, especially in the realm of land prices in the context of both economic crisis and Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. Prices rise when there are positive developments in the peace process; when there is a negative development, they drop again. Most of those living in the new housing (civil servant and army retirees) remain heavily indebted and some have simply stopped paying their mortgages. The increase in land prices has led many to sell their property just to survive.20 Although a few villagers are employed at Qsus’s rest house, Umm Qays has realized few benefits from the “development.” After encouraging signs in the immediate wake of the 1994 signing of the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, tourism dropped off sharply after the Israeli elections of 1996 brought Benjamin Netanyahu to power. Unemployment in the village remains high, and at least some villagers agree with Qsus’s assessment that Umm Qays’s only economic savior may be tourism. Nonetheless, the recent village activism suggests that if such a project is to succeed, the villagers themselves will have to play a more integral part in shaping its contours and writing its story. To date, the state, external agencies and the private sector have done more to disfigure than to develop Umm Qays.