Bridging the Divide
In the Holy Land

JERUSALEM—“This will be the first Palestinian nanotech lab,” says Mukhles Sowwan, peering into a dark, empty room at Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem. Making this a reality will be no mean feat. Sowwan, a physicist, needs about $1 million to equip a state-of-the-art laboratory for the kind of science he wants to do, and he can’t look to the university for help: Finances at Al-Quds are so precarious that faculty paychecks failed to arrive on time last month—for the third month in a row. “I’m cutting expenses in every way possible,” Sowwan says, including designing some of his own devices and software.

But Sowwan, 31, has something that few other Palestinians have: an Israeli research partner. Ever since doing a postdoc in the lab of Danny Porath, a physicist at Hebrew University in West Jerusalem, Sowwan and Porath have teamed up to coax biological molecules to assemble into circuitry and memory devices far expense of earlier periods. Such controversies are ongoing, such as the alleged destruction of pre-Islamic archaeological material to improve access to a mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem by the previous Palestinian government. Judeh Morkus, the Hamas-appointed minister of tourism and antiquities for the Palestinian Authority, says his government will not require archaeologists to probe only Islamic sites. “The focus will be as it was,” he says, adding that the ministry hopes to complete a review of existing agreements by the end of this month.

Taha is at home with turmoil. After Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed the Oslo Accords in 1994, archaeologists from Europe and North America swept in to probe the archaeological riches of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where layers of continuous occupation go back to the origins of civilization. Taha and his Palestinian colleagues were eager to work with partners from outside. International digs began to uncover archaeological gems, from Canaanite waterworks in the West Bank to Neolithic occupations in the Gaza Strip. But after the second Intifada flared up in 2000, one project after another “came to a standstill,” says Taha, who earned his archaeology Ph.D. in Germany. The conflict has restricted access to sites, he says, and in some areas it posed real danger to life and limb.

Palestinian Archaeology Braces for a Storm

RAMALLAH—Six years ago, Hamdan Taha, director of the Palestinian Authority’s Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage, was struggling to make ends meet with a skeleton crew and a $500,000 budget (Science, 7 January 2000, p. 33). Then last December, his department got a windfall: The Palestinian Authority offered a $6 million budget boost. Much of the new money was to be for preservation, but some was tagged for the excavation of a freshly uncovered Bronze Age site called Tell Etell, a few kilometers outside Ramallah—the first archaeological project that would be fully Palestinian from start to finish.

But fortunes change fast here. After Hamas was elected to the Palestinian government in January, Israel ceased transferring customs payments. Last week, the European Union announced that it is suspending direct aid to the Palestinian territories. And the United States is asking international agencies to withhold contributions until Hamas recognizes Israel and renounces violence, although few agencies so far have joined the squeeze.

“This will bring terrible impacts on Palestinian archaeology,” says Moain Sadeq, antiquities chief in Gaza. The Palestinian Authority may be forced to lay off guards at sites, which could exacerbate a serious looting problem. Some also fear that a Hamas-led government may defocus archaeological efforts on the region’s Islamic roots, at the

CREDITS (TOP TO BOTTOM): K. BUCKHEIT/SCIENCE (MAP); GERRIT VAN DER KOOIJ/LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

Making history. For the first time, Palestinian archaeologists are uncovering their heritage—including these Bronze Age pots from Tell Etell—on their own.
Palestinian archaeology students prepare for fieldwork.

But as partnerships unravel, some archaeologists hold Taha at fault. He is “autocratic,” says one archaeologist who has worked on collaborative Palestinian projects and requested anonymity. “When people talk about doing something in Palestine and they learn that it will have to go through Taha, the advice is basically to forget it” because, he says, Taha is “very political” and takes control of projects to consolidate his power.

Taha dismisses such criticisms as “colonial cultural attitudes.” He’s supported by Gerrit van der Kooij, an archaeologist at Leiden University in the Netherlands and one of the few Westerners who has continued to work with Taha during the recent crisis. “It doesn’t surprise me that outsiders become frustrated,” he says: Taha “sticks by his policy of equal partnership. That means Palestinians must be involved at every step,” from planning and digging to publishing. Van der Kooij says this policy is “fully justified and adds more social value to the project.” Morkus adds that his ministry will support collaborations “between us and any concerned parties. We believe in partnership,” he says.

Palestinian archaeologists say they just want to get on with their work. “But we have an even more basic problem than collaboration and funding,” says Issa Sarie, a physical anthropologist at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. To travel between his home in East Jerusalem, his office at Al-Quds University, and meetings with Taha in Ramallah, Sarie says he risks arrest on a daily basis. His application to renew a permit that allows his movement between Palestinian- and Israeli-controlled areas was declined recently “without explanation” by the Israeli government, he says. To get home to his wife and two children each night, Sarie must cross into Jerusalem illegally, picking his way between fences and mud puddles. “These are the kind of obstacles that keep Palestinian academics from succeeding,” he says.

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Editor's Summary