

A UNIQUE PALLADIAN MANSION IN PALESTINE • GILDED SPLENDOUR IN KUWAIT CITY • A BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL BEIRUT HOME

AD Portfolio



Reflected Glory

BEIT FELASTEEN IS BOTH A MAGNIFICENT PRIVATE HOME AND PUBLIC SYMBOL OF HOPE FOR THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

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In the Rotonda, an original statue of Hercules stands tall underneath the Dome of Mercy, which bears the name of the four prophets. "I bought the statue because it fits my story for Beit Felasteen," says Al Masri. "Hercules is viewed as the warrior who beat the East with his own hands, which serves as a fitting metaphor for the Palestinian people's willpower and courage."

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sixty kilometres north of Jerusalem lies the Palestinian city of Nablus, a place famous for its prized olive oil and soft soap. From the noisy bustle of the markets downtown, it's hard to miss Beit Felasteen, or House of Palestine, the palace on the hill.

This is the mansion of Palestinian business tycoon and philanthropist, Munib Al Masri. A self-made billionaire, Al Masri is often referred to as the Godfather or Duke of Nablus. His home, which he began building with his son Rabi, in 1998, is a replica of La Rotonda, Andrea Palladio's Renaissance villa near Vicenza in northern Italy. "People tell me it's better than the real thing," Al Masri says jovially as he walks through the gates.

But surrounded by two Israeli settlements and a military base, and overlooking a Palestinian refugee camp, you would be forgiven for thinking the palace looks slightly out of place. Yet Al Masri insists it's a sanctuary. "This is not just my family home; this is a home for all Palestinians - everyone is welcome." Beit Felasteen is open to visitors, Palestinians and tourists alike, but it's also a venue for local cultural events, political gatherings and lavish parties. The house is now even a candidate as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

A geologist by training, Al Masri first made his fortune in water, oil and gas exploration. He now sits on the boards of various businesses across Europe and the Middle East, most notably PADICO, an investment holding group which invests in telecommunications, construction and tourism. PADICO launched the Palestinian stock exchange in 1995 and now accounts for almost thirty percent of the entire Palestinian economy.

Entering through the imposing wooden front doors of Beit Felasteen, we arrive into the Rotonda, topped by what Al Masri has named the Dome of Mercy, which features frescoes of four prophets - Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. Directly beneath them is the centrepiece of the Rotonda, a marble statue of Hercules. "He is a symbol for the Palestinians; full of strength, courage and perseverance," Al Masri adds.

Now 83 years old, Al Masri is a proud Palestinian. "I've spent my life working towards a Palestinian state," he explains. While an independent Palestine looks less and less likely in his lifetime, Al Masri has been part of various initiatives to try and bring about elusive peace between Israelis and Palestinians. He has also played a unique role in the rapprochement between rival Palestinian political factions. All sides have gathered here in Beit Felasteen over the decades in search of peace and economic prosperity.

Al Masri seems to have lost hope on his life mission. "I have tried but I have failed. Peace now after President Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel makes genuine peace impossible. Jerusalem is a city that must be shared."

Beit Felasteen has also served as a meeting place for a range of international political and economic gatherings. Some of Al Masri's most recent guests include the Prime Minister of China and his delegation of government and private investors visiting the region in the hope of building a silk road through the Middle East.

RIGHT & BELOW: Known as the Duke of Nablus, Muneb Al Masri fell in love with this Babylonian piece "because of its strength and beauty". Open to visitors, Palestinians and tourists alike, Beit Felasteen is now a candidate as a UNESCO World Heritage site

OPPOSITE: A classic 17th century British style library with two antique wooden spiral staircases in the Jerusalem/Hebron room

"This is a home for all Palestinians – everyone is welcome"



Off from the Rotonda, and within the Jerusalem wing, lies Al Masri's impressive study with walls of books that reach the high ceilings. His experiences – and gravitas – are captured in hundreds of photographs of Al Masri arm in arm with presidents, kings and queens, his family, and the late Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, who he describes as his 'hero and confidant. We miss him very much'.

Upstairs, there are 11 large bedrooms. Despite the generous space, Al Masri jokes that it's a bit of squeeze when the family visit all at once; he met his American wife, Angela, while studying geology at the University of Texas. They married in 1953 and have six children and eighteen grandchildren.

Al Masri is eager to show off his favourite part of the home. We take an elevator to the basement. A colder air envelops you as you step out, and it feels like you've travelled in time as you look around. Lying beneath our feet are the grounds of a fourth century Byzantine monastery. Al Masri, like an excited child, recounts how he and his son first came across the archaeological site. "We were laying the foundations when we found three pieces of pottery. We couldn't believe it". Al Masri sent the pieces away for examination and waited patiently for the historical information. Any evidence of a link to a Jewish cultural heritage site could have seen him lose his land. Delighted – and relieved – by the clarification that the ruins were Byzantine, the family continued building Beit Felasteen, whilst preserving the chapel and mosaics they had unearthed. Archaeologists from around the globe have come to see the site. Beit Felasteen is not only a home-cum-open museum, but over the years it has also evolved into an agricultural cooperative. Al Masri





ABOVE: A staircase made of local limestone from the Cretaceous Period leads to the seven bedrooms on the second and third floors **OPPOSITE:** In the Haifa/Jaffa salon, there are red velvet sofas and the green and gold-plated Ottoman throne of Khedive Ismail. To the left of the fireplace, a painting by Picasso, while the carpet on the wall represents Raphael's *The Dancing Nymph*

keeps honey bees and grows vegetables. He has over eight thousand olive trees and his guests are often offered a Beit Felasteen olive soap.

The elegant gardens of Beit Felasteen were designed by the renowned French landscape architect Louis Benech. Beyond the remains of a genuine Roman amphitheatre, where Al Masri has staged various performances and where his youngest son got married, sits something quite extraordinary: the winter *jardin d'hiver*, a glasshouse Napoleon 3rd had made for his Italian lover. Al Masri fell in love with it on a visit to Paris, and had it shipped to the Middle East and reassembled.

Amongst all this rare beauty, there's something amiss on the otherwise pristine exterior walls. "This is the scar an Israeli tank left when the army invaded the house," Al Masri explains. The Israeli army temporarily occupied Beit Felasteen during the Palestinian Uprising, the Second Intifada in 2000.

As his home and all its many remarkable features attest, Al Masri is nothing if not ambitious. The latest addition, just beyond the gates, is the mosque Al Masri recently built for the public. Known as Martyr Yasser Arafat Mosque, its call to prayer can be heard across the valley. □



The dining room is also called the Nazaretti, Bethlehem room. Above the fireplace, which is carved into two winged women, on either side is a safe. handmade, silk-woven carpet from the Ottoman era. A 17th century rock crystal chandelier hangs above the dining table.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: In the Lud bedroom, the furniture is from the Louis XVI period; The Gaza bedroom, also the master bedroom, is decorated in Chinese style - including a hand-embroidered bed cover; The bathtub in the en-suite master bathroom is handmade from Syrian limestone, while the pendant above is made of brass from Syria

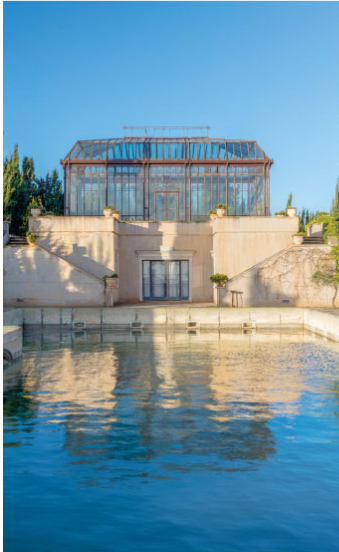
Despite the generous space and eleven bedrooms, Al Masri jokes that it's a bit of squeeze when the family visit all at once



ABOVE: In the garden, a fountain made from 18th century Palestinian tiles and a Turkish marble basin. **OPPOSITE:** "This statue depicts how the artist sees me when I am thinking," says Al Masri. Beneath the iron and limestone figure are the lyrics of the Arab anthem Mawtini, written by the late Nablus-born poet Ibrahim Tougan

The elegant gardens were designed by the renowned French landscape architect Louis Benech





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Al Masri bought an iron and glass *jardin d'hiver* (winter house) which Napoleon the 3rd had once presented to the Italian opera singer, Marietta Alboni; Byzantine mosaics in the basement; the ancient Roman amphitheatre; Beyond the gates of Beit Felasteen is the mosque Al Masri recently built for the public, known as Martyr Yasser Arafat Mosque **OPPOSITE:** Inside the mosque, a hall was built in honour of Sultan Abdul Hamid II



Beit Felasteen was built upon Byzantine ruins, all the while preserving the chapel and mosaics that were unearthed beneath

