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1. Introduction

1.1. Foreword

When I got on the *sarḥīs* in Ramallah, early in the morning in June 2019, I was excited. I had heard a lot about the city I was going to visit: that it was conservative and I'd better bring long-sleeved shirts, that it was beautiful, that the typical sweets were beyond compare, that its people were something else, stubborn, but warm and welcoming, and that they certainly had their own ways.

A friend I knew in Amman who is from Nablus was glad to have fled the suffocating small-town air on one hand and the traumatising experience of violence, siege and occupation he had witnessed as a child on the other. And yet, he spoke of the city and the people he knew there with such respect and tenderness. In short, I had no idea what to make of those bits and pieces of information that refused to form a well-rounded picture, and I wanted to see for myself.

I got off in the city centre and was immediately aware that here, I could not disappear between the other foreigners like I could in Ramallah. There was hardly anybody who was visibly not Arab, and people noticed me immediately and quite openly and unashamedly talked about me, probably assuming I did not speak any Arabic (and, to my annoyance, supposing that I was also illiterate in basic human communication). A few days before, I had had a small climbing accident, and so I limped through the city looking for the hostel where I had booked a room. The curiosity I was met with was startling. Several people pointed at my foot and asked "Wawa?", which is baby talk for "Are you hurt?", or "Is she hurt?". So I started replying, even when the question was not directed at me. People seemed not to feel caught at all, and indeed were very friendly and politely wished me to get well soon. Being so curious apparently was normal.

Not surprisingly, commonly used navigation apps do not cover the West Bank very well. So I stopped and asked a few old men sitting in front of a shop if they could help me find my hostel. They did not know where I needed to go but one of them decided to take care of it anyway, and by the magic of calling someone who called someone who knew something or someone, he finally handed me over to Basil, who works for Turquoise hostel. I thanked the old man, and he took me aside to ask me in confidence if I was sure I had enough money to pay for the hotel room and tell me that I could of course rely on him and his friends anytime. I was touched. I thanked him again and reassured him that I was going to be fine.

Somehow, the brief experience I had in Nablus stuck in my mind. What was it that made the people in this city, that was hit so hard by the retaliation against the Palestinian *intifāḍas* and was covered with posters and memorials for "martyrs" who died disturbingly young, act with such kindness towards me? A city, demonized as a pit of violent terrorist

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evil and hyped as the heartland of brave resistance.

Finally, what tipped the scales and convinced me to choose the topic for my master's thesis was that there was something where everything came together: Nabulsi soap is a historical object in the sense that it has been produced in unchanged ways for centuries, and in the sense that the history of soap is the history of Nablus and vice versa. It stands symbolically for the Palestinian struggle for their identity and their rights, similar to the *kūfiyye*-scarf. But it is also an ordinary object that is still used widely. After all, it is just soap. Last but not least, it is an object that is as Nabulsi as it gets, and the soap factories and soap factory owners and workers are an important part of the narrative from which the social fabric of the city is woven.

The "slippery ground" on which Nabulsi identity is built not only serves as a catchy title and a reference to soap: throughout the thesis, I have often struggled to keep my balance in dealing with this wildly complicated (geographic and academic) area, and from the interviews conducted, I conclude that Nabulsi do, too.

The people who have helped make this project possible are numerous. On the academic side, it is Noura Kamal's Ph.D. thesis on Nablus under siege and occupation that has helped me understand some patterns of behaviour I have encountered better, and her description of the curiosity of Nabulsi as part of building the networks that make Nablus so resilient was eye-opening. Her help was, however, not limited to the intellectual realm. Her encouragement on a personal level has also been invaluable, and more than once she challenged my long-held beliefs on Palestine.

In the early stages, Alessandra, Abed and Basil not only made me feel welcome in Nablus, but helped spark my fascination for the city and also to feel it was possible to conduct research there, with a little help from friends. Alessandra, perhaps without knowing, greatly made the journey of finding a topic easier, or maybe the journey of the topic finding me. Abed has connected me to many of my interviewees, and despite his busy schedule took great interest in my research. I cannot credit him enough for this.

I also want to thank all of the people who gave me an hour of their time and let me into their lives, if only for the brief duration of an interview. They are wonderful and brave, and I am grateful I had a chance to meet them.

My supervisor, Dr. Stephan Procházka, has supported me tirelessly in my studies in Vienna and abroad. He is not only the most knowledgeable person I know, but also the kindest supervisor. He has shaped my experience at the university and it is thanks to him that I never lost interest in Arabic as a language and the Arab world as a field of study - or lost hope, for that matter.

Writing on Palestine and Palestinian-related topics always seems to acquire a political dimension hardly controllable, and the question of heritage and identity, even when it concerns something seemingly as trivial as soap, cannot be independent of politics. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict always colours research on this area. I apply the term "Palestine" throughout this thesis to the West Bank and Gaza strip. I use the term "Palestinians" for the Arab citizens of historic Palestine, both in the Palestinian territories and Israel, regardless of their religious or political affiliation. Where the larger region of today's Israel and Palestine is concerned before the independence of Israel, I use the term "historic Palestine". Where the time-frame is clear from context, I sometimes use

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"historic Palestine" and "Palestine" interchangeably.

The Palestinian people are still being unlawfully deprived of their land by Israeli settler activities in the West Bank, and of opportunities for economic and social development towards a better future by the blockade on Gaza, numerous checkpoints including the control of external borders, highways cutting through the West Bank, the separation wall that is in large parts built on Palestinian land contrary to international law, policies of neglect towards Arab villages in Israel and the ongoing violence committed by the Israeli military and militant settlers that to a large extent targets civilians.

I also wish to clearly state that my opinion is in no way informed by hatred towards Israel or by denial of its existence. I believe this discussion is irrelevant and anachronistic, given the facts. Such musings, moreover, are redundant both to my views and to this thesis.

I wish for the Palestinians to live self-determinedly and free, in whichever form this may be implemented in the end. The freedom I wish for consists of the freedom from fear, violence and fundamentalism. The Palestinian society, like any other society, is far from perfect. The aim of this thesis is not to romanticise Nablus, Palestine or the Palestinians. I see no heroism in violence on either side of the conflict. This thesis merely strives to show there are people in Nablus who live, work, and speak. Ordinary people, neither heroes nor monsters, people with a history, a present and a future.

1.2. Research questions and methods

The main question this thesis asks is "What is Nabulsi identity, how did it come in to being, how does it relate to soap and in which way is it different from Palestinian identity if at all?"

There are three strands of thought that connected to make up the topic. The first started out from an interest in Palestinian handicraft and production. This quickly proved to be linked to questions of identity: by making something, a self-image is made as well. Palestinians take great pride in everyday resistance to hardship by *making*, including *making something of their lives*.

The second was a keen interest in Nablus as a city. I visited it briefly in 2019 and felt I had to find out more about what gives this city its particular air. Nabulsi have a strong sense of local belonging, yet this local identity is not perceived as contradictory to a Palestinian identity. When I started researching the how and why and what of Nabulsi soap, it became apparent that this was a special case of identity linked to place and production. As Veronique Bontemps has pointed out in her doctoral thesis and several articles¹, with soap, "Palestinian" and "Nabulsi" heritage meet in an everyday object. I looked at the production of soap and how it is linked to the history of the city, but also what other events shaped local history. In a second step, I investigated how identity is connected to soap through history. For that purpose, I conducted interviews.

This opened up a whole new dimension: despite great disruptions, there are some striking continuities in Nablus. Moreover, my interviewees emphasised the great temporal

¹See Bontemps 2009, 2012 and 2014.

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duration of their people's presence in Nablus. They felt they were part of something ancient. They also stressed the unity of Palestine. Despite the great pride in Nabulsi locality, all of them feel connected to a greater entity. Aware of the contradictoriness of competing identities, they manage to be Nabulsi, Palestinian, Levantine, Arab, and global citizens, all at the same time and within the same person. My research became a search for continuities and contradictions. The focus on identity distinguishes this thesis from earlier articles and the doctoral thesis by Bontemps, whose focus lies on heritage.

The third strand is my interest in language and particularly in *how people talk* and *why they talk like they talk*, but also *what people say* and *how they say what they say*. Having read up on soap, Nablus and Palestinian identity, I found I had to run a check on my observations and readings and see what people in Nablus thought about the scholarly theories that dealt with the elements of their identity. This is why I interviewed soap producers or people connected to the production of soap, but also people from Nablus whom I asked about their city and the memories and stories they connected with Nabulsi soap. By doing this, I tried to get a sense of what narratives are actually important regarding soap as a part of heritage, and heritage as a constituent of identity - apart from the majority discourse and scholarly discourse. To this end, I analyse the narratives with which my interviewees presented me in the interviews to establish similarities and disparities, both between what different people told me and what can be found in analyses of identity construction more ample than mine. I thereby aspire to detect the fine lines between local and national heritage and identity, as they appeared distinct from each other in the relevant literature - or discern a lack of such fine lines, indicating an integrated identity.

Due to the Corona virus pandemic, travel was very limited during the time of writing this thesis. It was necessary to conduct the interviews online, which has of course narrowed the scope of the interviews in terms of socio-economic background. People had to have access to the internet and know how to use videochat platforms for me to be able to interview them, and they had to be recruited through connections, which ruled out the possibility of by-chance encounters. This kind of limitation, however, also had a positive impact: people I knew connected me directly to their friends, colleagues, students and family, and that of course meant I had a strong base of trust in advance. It also meant I could talk to people directly in their homes where they felt most comfortable.

The interviews were one-on-one interviews of about half an hour to an hour and a half in duration (sometimes prolonged due to bad internet connection). I had formulated some questions in advance, which can be found in the appendix to this thesis. More importantly, I relied on my counterparts to open up to me, and laid great emphasis on the little details they told me, sometimes during the interview and sometimes as an added thought not necessarily connected to a specific question. How people construct meaning from anecdotes is a major concern of this thesis.

This "remote fieldwork" is of course complimented by literature research. For a history of Palestine, I relied largely on the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé. While I am aware that his book "is written by one who admits compassion for the colonized not the colonizer; who sympathizes with the occupied not the occupiers; and sides with the workers not the bosses", as Pappé somewhat dramatically states, I take it such declarations entrust the

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reader with distinguishing where sympathy for one side influences writing more than it should, and have similarly declared my position and trust in the reader's judgment.

For a social and economic history of Nablus, Beshara Doumani lay the ground with his scrupulous analysis of original sources and comprehensive description of the social and economic history of Jabal Nablus from the 18th to 20th century. To my great regret, no such magnificent work is available for the period after the turn of the 20th century for this specific area apart from Sarah Graham-Brown's account of the political economy of Nablus from 1929 to 1948. This might be why the early period of soap-making takes up relatively much space compared to the period after 1900 and up to the more recent accounts presented in the interviews. This gap would have had to be filled by more detailed research than what I could manage in the course of this thesis, and therefore emphasis for this period of time lies more on general Palestinian phenomena.

On heritage and the construction of it, and on how identity or identities are made, specifically in Palestine, Rashid Khalidi's "Palestinian Identity" in the 2010 re-issue, has been extremely valuable. It is probably the most ample study on the emergence of a Palestinian national identity and of Palestinian nationalism in the absence of a Palestinian national state. He notes that the heated discussions which even mentioning the terms "Palestine" and "Palestinian" sparks have produced little useful scholarship, and the conflict may be so heated precisely because passion meets obliviousness like in few other places, and "a dogmatic certainty about [...] beliefs" meets "a background of nearly complete ignorance of Palestine and its history"², a fact that has concerned me in writing this thesis on two levels. Firstly, I hope to avoid contributing to a blurred account on Palestine through my own writing and to make my thought process transparent. Secondly, I hope to have avoided biased sources, at least without laying open where sources take sides. There is a multitude of conflicting narratives regarding Palestine, which is precisely where I aim to set this thesis: how do Nabulsi navigate these narratives?

There are also various works on soap-making that I relied on. For the history of soap and its place in the Palestinian heritage discourse, Bontemps has published the most comprehensive works. Volume IV of Gustav Dalman's ample ethnographic work "Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina" presents various Palestinian crafts, among them soap-making.

While certainly an outside perspective is valuable at times, the work of Palestinian intellectuals cannot be overestimated for the topic in question. Thus I owe insights to scholars such as the already mentioned Noura Kamal, Lisa Taraki and Salim Tamari³. It goes without saying that as an outsider to the city under study, much of its intricacies may have escaped me, and especially regarding nationalism, I am much influenced by a central European concept of the term, as is discussed at length in the relevant chapters.

Transcription of terminology differs according to the source I used: where I know a detail from an interview, I have used the morpho-phonemic transcription closest to the actual pronunciation of a word. Where I only encountered a term in reading, I have opted for a more standard transcription when in doubt⁴. Where I know a term only already

²Khalidi 2010, 12f.

³The latter has not been cited as often as deserved, but his collection of essays "Mountain against the Sea" is highly recommended for a better understanding of Palestinian society.

⁴Rather than guessing how it might be pronounced in the Nabulsi dialect.

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transcribed into Latin letters, I have kept the character of this transcription intact and merely adapted it to the transcription system I use throughout the thesis. Similarly, I have transcribed names in transliteration from Arabic script where I have only read them in that script, but opted for the transcription preferred by the person (i.e. how they spell their name in Latin letters) or the local pronunciation where it was known to me. My transcription follows the guidelines of Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG), modified where necessary. For Arabic speciality terms well-known in English, I have used the DMG transcription but have not used italics, while for cities I have used the common English transcription ("intifāḍa" instead of "intifada" or "*intifāda*", and "Nablus", for example).

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To tie the narratives presented to me by the interviewees to a solid framework, and to enable eventually the "connecting of the dots", it is necessary to take a close look at a few things before a discussion of the interviews is feasible. The first of them is the history of the place the interviewees' identity is rooted in. It is followed by the interviews I conducted with people from Nablus, which together with the chapters on soap and identity constitute the main part of this thesis. The last part of the thesis brings the interviews and the theoretical framework together in a discussion.

Nablus was founded as Flavia Neapolis in 72CE under the Roman emperor Vespasian, and its name is a corrupted form of the Greek *neapolis*. It is erroneously associated with ancient Shekhem and thus referred to as Shekhem in modern Hebrew. Geographically, it lies between two mountains, Ġirzīm (also called Ġabal aṭ-Ṭūr) and ʿAybāl, in what today is the West Bank and part of the Palestinian territories. It is classified as "area A" under the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Oslo II accord.^[1]

There are several springs in the area, which make its surroundings fertile and suitable for agriculture, especially olives. It is an economic centre for northern Palestine, and has traditionally been a merchant city with bustling trade to Syria and Egypt as well as modern-day Jordan.^[2]

Nablus' economy for a long time was dominated by soap production. Since soap-making is a very old trade, we will have to go back in history quite a bit to understand its beginnings and development until today. But also to grapple with recent narratives that constitute Palestinian identity, it is necessary to trace how Palestine came to take the shape it takes today. This chapter will give a brief outline of Palestinian history from the rule of the Ottoman empire until today. This is in no way comprehensive, and a lot will be shortened or left out, especially concerning Palestinians living in Israel and the Gaza strip, as well as Israeli history which is obviously strongly connected with Palestinian history. This is for the sake of brevity. On the other hand, we will have to touch on much earlier history in later chapters as well to explain some nationalist views on who should or should not live in historic Palestine.

Even though soap was produced in Nablus at least as early as the 14th century, long before the Ottoman rule of Palestine^[3] it is the 19th century where we begin this cursory history. The Ottoman era lay the ground for many later developments that still affect Palestinians today.

¹Signed in 1995.

²*Encyclopædia Britannica: Nāblus* 2020.

³Doumani 1995, p. 185.

2.1. The Ottoman empire

Palestine had been under Ottoman rule from the beginning of the 16th century and remained an Ottoman province until the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire disintegrated. In the latest period of Ottoman rule, it was divided into three *sanjaqs*: Acre, Jerusalem and Nablus. To limit the influence of Damascus, the most powerful city in the region, Acre and Nablus were made part of the Beirut *vilayet*, and Jerusalem became an independent *sanjaq*.⁴ Israel/Palestine as we know it today, was not an administrative unit. Of the 500,000 people that inhabited the area in the late 19th century, about 60,000 were Christians, 20,000 were Jews, 10,000 were Europeans, and there were around 50,000 Ottoman soldiers. The rest of the population were Arab Muslims.⁵ Historic Palestine was under the rule of Beirut in the North and of Jerusalem in the South and would only be officially united with the onset of the British Mandate rule.⁶

Muhammad Ali Pasha, the ruler of Egypt, held Palestine from 1831-1840 and his son Ibrahim Pasha introduced many reforms, particularly in agriculture. Those reforms also gave the local elite some right of participation, including Christians and Jews. The 1834 revolt against the rulers from Egypt was an expression of discontent with heavy taxation and with drafting young boys for the army. This event has sometimes been portrayed as the first struggle for national Palestinian independence, although it can be plausibly argued that the main motivation behind it was more immediate and less ideological.⁷ This is important to note, as a more full national consciousness did not form until later, unlike the sense of local belonging that pre-dates it.

With the help of European powers, especially the British, the Ottomans re-conquered Palestine. Reforms begun under Ibrahim Pasha continued. Of particular influence was the establishment of consulates that later facilitated the arrival of templars and Zionists. This was a period of restructuring for all of the Ottoman empire as it struggled not to fall behind Europe.⁸ The *tanzimat*-reforms were designed to politically modernize the empire and give the central power in Istanbul more direct access to its citizens. However, they did not in fact limit the powers of the local elite like they were intended to.⁹

On the contrary: increased interaction with Ottoman authorities made the ordinary citizens all the more dependent on middle men, but also the officials trusted in the traditional leaders to be their point of contact with the people in the provinces. In the course of the late 19th century, power shifted from rural chieftains towards urban elites, who remained more loyal to the Ottoman empire than the rural power bases and "adapted easily to the new policies." The urban notables (*ʿaḡyān*) were integrated well into the new system of regional councils and municipalities.¹⁰ A new system of land-ownership and taxation of land targeted the rural strongholds and the bedouins, but left the urban

⁴Pappé 2006, pp. 25–27.

⁵Pappé 2006, p. 14.

⁶Pappé 2006, p. 28.

⁷Pappé 2006, p. 21.

⁸Reinkowski 1995, p. 12.

⁹Hourani 1969, p. 62.

¹⁰Pappé 2006, p. 29.

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notables relatively undisturbed.^[11] The complex picture of the Palestinian elites is discussed in chapters below. For Nablus, it can be said that they had a strong local base, both social and economic, and that this economic base was strongly related to successful soap production.

The European view on Palestine was that of a backwards area that was in desperate need of modernisation, which could only be brought about by European efforts.^[12] The integration of Palestine into a globalised economy did not make the vast majority of people in historic Palestine fare better. While some classes, like the merchant class, greatly profited from the integration of Palestine into the global economy and were able to insert themselves into the ranks of the elite, the masses did not.^[13]

The 1908 Young Turk revolution in the Ottoman empire brought about the re-installment of the constitution and major administrative changes. The parliament in Istanbul was restored. This event happened during the second *aliyah*.^[14] Jewish immigration to Palestine is a very old phenomenon, caused by the strong religious ties between Judaism and historic Palestine and especially Jerusalem. In the early 1900s, however, the numbers of immigrants grew larger, and they were increasingly better organised. Zionist ideology, with the establishment of a Jewish state at its core, gained steam. Jewish immigration was undesired by the Ottoman empire, as any nationalist entity threatened Ottoman hegemony.^[15] The newcomers bought land from absentee landlords, mostly for agricultural use, and thereby gained a legal title to the land that overruled the usufruct rights held by Arabs through customary law. Contrary to earlier land sales during the first *aliyah*, where the owner changed, but not the people tilling the land, Zionist thought discouraged the employment of Arab workers on Jewish land. The Arabs saw the land sales as colonisation by the "new crusaders", without the Ottoman government so much as lifting a finger.^[16] While Sultan Abdülhamid II had been firmly opposed to Jewish immigration, as this would have caused yet another problem with a nationalist entity within the empire, the Young Turks were less restrictive.^[17] A generally pro-Zionist stance, however, cannot be claimed by serious historians, and belongs in the realm of conspiracy theories.^[18]

Zionism^[19] is based on two principles: that the Jews will never have their full and undisputed right to live if they remain in the diaspora, and that only a national entity in Palestine will provide the base for a free national, cultural and social life for Jews.^[20] While Zionists stress the unique dimension of Zionism, many others see it firmly rooted

¹¹Pappé 2006, p. 49.

¹²Pappé 2006, p. 35.

¹³Pappé 2006, p. 23.

¹⁴Wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine.

¹⁵Ofer 1991, p. 3.

¹⁶Khalidi 2010, p. 31.

¹⁷Reinkowski 1995, p. 111.

¹⁸Reinkowski 1995, p. 116.

¹⁹I entirely leave out various branches of Zionism that diverged from what Zionism came to mean. See Reinkowski 1995:211: "Durch die historische Konkretisierung zum 'jüdischen Nationalstaat' erhält die vorgeordnete Ideologie nachträglich eine klare Fokussierung, die so nicht gegeben war." I also do not discuss Jewish opposition to Zionism, which is important in the history of Zionism but negligible for this thesis.

²⁰Reinkowski 1995, p. 21.

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in European colonialism²¹.

The root cause for the miserable situation of Palestinian peasants lay in the 1858 Ottoman land reform. While in the hills - where Nablus lies - private landownership was the norm, especially for the terraced olives and fruit groves²² and therefore the people were less affected by the new policies, especially in the fertile plains communal landownership or usufruct were common²³. Under the new tax law, communally owned land or land owned by customary law had to be registered, which many avoided or simply could not afford. Therefore, large portions of land were registered in the names of a few wealthy individuals able to pay the higher taxes. Their connection to the land they owned was purely a business relation.²⁴ Large portions of land accumulated in the hands of a few.²⁵

Opposition to Zionism arose among Palestinians - contrary to popular belief, which places the beginnings of anti-Zionism at the time of the British Mandate period. In conflicts between the old or customary owners of the land and the new owners, the authorities naturally intervened in favour of the latter who held a legal title to the land. However, it has to be noted that the former Arab cultivators firmly believed they had legal rights to this land, and that this belief was in perfect accordance with the legal principles that had governed Palestine for millenia. Eventually, the Jews were allowed to arm themselves for defense, and paramilitary groups were established, met by armed peasant resistance from the Arabs.²⁶ Thus, even before the British Mandate period and long before Israel became a state, the conflict showed potential for escalation.

Despite the early ideological opposition to Zionism and the occasional resistance by peasants who came in direct contact with it, "[...] for most of Palestine's population, Zionism was still a storm in a teacup. The Jewish colonies were few, and only a handful of Palestinian villages came into contact with them. The pastoral worldview owed much to the dominance of rural life, and it was not until the First World War, and the major Zionist drives for land purchase, that the rural population witnessed events that changed their lives beyond recognition."²⁷

The stance of the Young Turks became pro-Turkish and decidedly anti-Arab after a coup in Istanbul in 1912, which forced proto-nationalist Arab movements to go underground, but they only gained followers and surfaced as political parties at the end of WWI. Unlike in the prior Ottoman *millet* system that divided people by religion, people began to align as an anti-Turkish and later anti-Zionist coalition of Palestinian Arabs.²⁸

Just before WWI, the Arab population can be estimated at over 720 000 and the Jewish population at about 60 000 according to Khalidi, who relies on McCarthy examining con-

²¹Reinkowski 1995, p. 139.

²²Graham-Brown 1982, p. 109.

²³This was known as the *mušāḥ* system where parcels of land rotated between the families of a village, so each could till the most fertile parts for some time. See Pappé 2006:24.

²⁴Khalidi 2010, pp. 93–95.

²⁵This tendency started in the 19th century and continued into the 20th century. Graham-Brown (op. cit.) lists 5 persons owning 121 000 *dunums* of land in the Nablus and Tulkarm area in the time under study (1920–48).

²⁶Khalidi 2010, pp. 103–105.

²⁷Pappé 2006, p. 56.

²⁸Pappé 2006, pp. 57–59.

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temporary Ottoman and Western statistics, and the Jewish population was concentrated in four cities (Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, Safad) and to a lesser extent in about 40 agricultural colonies. Whereas the urban Jewish population was less political and more religiously-oriented, many in the countryside were "committed Zionists".²⁹

When the First World War broke out, the Ottoman empire joined the war on the side of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire. The war efforts left Palestine barren and deprived many Palestinians of their livelihood as forests were chopped down to build railways, forced labour columns filled the street and many died of hunger.³⁰

The British, who had declared war on the Ottoman empire, gained the support of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, whom they hoped to install as caliph and thereby establish British influence in the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which also meant great influence in other countries with a Muslim populace.³¹ This was attempted by vaguely promising independence for an Arab state in the Middle East under the rule of the Sharif. This was never translated into action for Palestine: the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement betrayed this promise. The Middle East was to be divided between Britain and France.³²

Palestine fell under British rule instead of joint French and British rule, and the British stayed in power until 1948. In 1917-18, British forces occupied Palestine, and in 1922 Palestine came formally under mandate rule by a League of Nations decision.³³ In 1918, the area of later Israel and Palestine was consolidated under the rule of the British general Allenby and for the first time constituted an actual administrative unit. Its population consisted of 650,000 Muslims, 80,000 Christians and 60,000 Jews, consisting both of the old Ottoman Jewish *millet* and the Zionist settlers. 6% of the population had paid the price of the First World War with their lives.³⁴

As we will see in chapters below, at this point Palestine was already perceived as an entity by some. It was the British mandate rule and subsequent events, however, that firmly anchored Palestine as a potential national entity in the minds of people, although Palestinian nationalism had to compete with other reference points of identity such as pan-Arabism. For Nablus, the Ottoman era was viewed largely as positive by my interviewees, and the connection of Nabulsi soap and Turkish baths was often highlighted. The British mandate, on the other hand, was frequently referred to as the "British occupation", and especially the *divide et impera* policies were seen as having a decidedly negative impact on Palestine.

2.2. The British mandate

Mandate Palestine was not considered a British colony. This amounted to to an economic disadvantage, as it was not "eligible for the preferential treatment in trade increasingly

²⁹Khalidi [2010], pp. 96–97.

³⁰Pappé [2006], pp. 61–64.

³¹Low2020

³²Pappé [2006], p. 66.

³³Graham-Brown [1982], p. 92.

³⁴Pappé [2006], pp. 72–73.

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Figure 2.1.: Administrative boundaries during the Ottoman rule in Palestine.
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granted to British colonies.³⁵ But while Palestine was not officially a colony, it also lacked the implementation of a self-governing democratic structure. "Against this anomalous background [of Palestine never transitioning to a self-determined state], we can better understand the Palestinian leadership's disinclination to compromise in the first years of the Mandate. They represented 90 per cent of the inhabitants, who were treated as if they constituted only 50 per cent. Had the Mandate sponsored democratic elections for local government and parliament, as it had in Egypt and Iraq, the Arab Palestinian character of the land would never have been in doubt."³⁶

In the Palestinian political landscape, two factions emerged. One was centered around Amin al-Husayni, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the *maḡlisiyyūn* and the other was anti-Mufti, the *muḡāridūn*. Both factions, however, were opposed to Zionism and willing to tolerate British rule in order to contain it. Thus, they opposed political parity with the Jewish citizens of the Mandate, as numbers were clearly in favour of the non-Jewish population. The Zionists³⁷, however, agreed to parity even though it undermined their ultimate goal of a Jewish state, as long as they could rely on the Arabs opposing it. When this opposition changed in 1928 as a more pragmatic line was adopted, the Zionist leaders refused parity and instead proposed the partition of Palestine.³⁸

Of great importance and contradictory to the hopes of the Arab leaders was a document signed by the British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour. The 1917 Balfour declaration stated British support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The British siding with the Zionists was certainly motivated by many factors. Among them was the British seeing themselves as the benefactors of minorities (like Christians, Jews and Druze) in the Middle East, which had granted them influence in the Ottoman era³⁹, but also the idea among Christians to "facilitate the return of the Jews to precipitate the second coming of the Messiah and an overestimation of Jewish influence in America, from which Britain hoped to obtain a loan for their war efforts."⁴⁰ Another factor was the establishment of a pro-British colony in Palestine to secure British control of the Suez canal.⁴¹

"In summary, the negotiations on Palestine's future produced three documents: the Husayn-McMahon correspondence [between the British High Commissioner of Egypt and the Sharif of Mecca], the Sykes-Picot Agreement [negotiated by the British diplomat Mark Sykes and the French consul general in Beirut François Georges-Picot] and the Balfour Declaration [signed by the British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour]. Each included a promise for the local population. In ambiguous language, each promise contradicted the other two. The first associated the future of Palestine with that of an Arab Hashemite

³⁵Graham-Brown 1982, p. 93.

³⁶Pappé 2006, p. 84.

³⁷Zionism was the dominant political ideology, and Zionists were the group that dominated politics. There were, of course, also non-Zionist Jews in historic Palestine.

³⁸Pappé 2006, pp. 85–86.

³⁹This patronage of European powers for *millets* (religious groups) was humanitarian intervention mixed with political agenda, which discredited this kind of patronage system. See Reinkowski 1995:14.

⁴⁰Pappé 2006, pp. 67–68.

⁴¹Reinkowski 1995, p. 36.

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kingdom⁴² in the Arab world; the second proposed placing Palestine under Anglo–French colonial rule; and the last envisaged it as a future Jewish state."⁴³

The Palestinian population remained largely dependent on agriculture and sometimes on subsistence farming. This was deliberately encouraged, as urbanisation was seen as a dangerous source for nationalism and politicisation. Modernisation had produced anti-British sentiment in Egypt and India and was therefore undertaken cautiously. This, however, left the "rural economy unable to cope with the economic competition of the Jewish market"⁴⁴, which was way more industrialised and capitalist than the Palestinian economy. It was geared towards the export of, among other goods, citrus fruits as a cash crop. For some time, there was no import duty on the import of raw materials such as olive oil, which greatly damaged the local agriculture, after aid for industry had been demanded.⁴⁵

Money-lending at high interest, albeit prohibited by Islamic law, led to peasants being in debt. At the same time, there was an artificial shortage in agricultural land, as land bought by the Jewish Agency was permanently taken off the market, and a price increase because buying land was seen as a Zionist duty. Land sales at inflated prices further served to accumulate wealth in the hands of a few (Arabs and Jews alike) and the dispossession of many (Arab peasants).⁴⁶

The advantage the villages had over the city during wartime in the First World War ceased as exports increased. The consumption level by the Jewish and British populations of Palestine was unprecedented and despite Zionist efforts to exclude Arab labour on Jewish land, this became a significant factor for the Palestinian economy.⁴⁷

Nationalism gravitated towards the Arab state of Greater Syria under the rule of Faysal, a son of Sharif Husayn. A new generation of sons of notable families who had enjoyed a secular education, took the lead in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Hebron and Nablus. Newspapers sprang up like mushrooms. Faysal's reign, however, did not last long, and French troops took over Lebanon and Syria, causing Faysal to flee.^{48 49}

Open riots broke out in Jerusalem in 1929 and the local elite was unable to control them. Casualties were about 300 people on the Jewish side, matched by an equal number on their Arab opponent's side. Those riots soon spilled over to the shanty-towns and countryside, where Palestinians had lost their subsistence, and general discontent was directed towards the Jews in violent actions, although they certainly were not the single cause for the misery of the peasants. The rise of Nazism in Europe greatly increased the urgency of establishing a secure refuge for Jews fleeing brutal persecution and seeking refuge in Palestine, and the impulse to create a state where Jews would be the undisputed majority. This added to the tension.⁵⁰

⁴²The Hashemite family of Sharif al-Husayn.

⁴³Pappé 2006, p. 68.

⁴⁴Pappé 2006, p. 74.

⁴⁵Graham-Brown 1982, p. 97.

⁴⁶Graham-Brown 1982, pp. 101–103.

⁴⁷Pappé 2006, p. 77.

⁴⁸Pappé 2006, pp. 79–81.

⁴⁹He was subsequently installed as ruler in Iraq, while Transjordan went to his brother Abdallah.

⁵⁰Pappé 2006, pp. 91–93.

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The Arab general strike in 1936 led to a bloody clash between protesters and British police. It was sparked by the momentum that a rural uprising, led by the Syrian preacher ʿIzz ad-Dīn al-Qassām, created. As short-lived as it was, it served as a blueprint for later interpretations of the resistance against Israeli occupation in terms of an Islamic grassroots movement. Pappé, however, argues that Qassām "failed to impress rural Palestine as a whole, where custom, not religion, determined daily morality, conduct and routine."⁵¹ Local patriotism always outdid nationalism. The reality in the city and in the countryside were so different from each other that it was next to impossible to establish common ground.

1936, during the build-up to the Second World War, was not a good time for a small national movement. The British quelled the rebellion with brute force, arresting and exiling many of the notables and leaving Palestine leaderless. The admissions made to the Arabs in limiting Jewish immigration in 1939 came at the height of the Nazi killing machine raging in Europe and forced the Jewish community to take clandestine action: facilitating illegal immigration and the formation of paramilitary organisations.⁵² Having the power to decide who entered Palestine illegally, the Zionist organisations gave priority to those physically fit and ideologically in line.⁵³

During the British mandate period, it became obvious that the discrepancies between the elites and the subalterns were vast. On a national level, this still has a great effect in that people feel the authorities do not work for them but rather just try to stay in power, even though how those elites are constituted has changed drastically. On a local level, however, it is quite the opposite: even though there are surprising continuities as to who belongs to elite families and who does not, local authorities' power is deeply rooted in social connectedness.

In the Second World War, Palestine was not an active battleground. Despite basic commodities being rationed, hyperinflation could be avoided. The war created jobs and in the years after the war, the quality of life increased especially for women, who worked in jobs they had never held before and enjoyed fewer restrictions on movement and dress.⁵⁴ But of course, the war left the British mandate weakened. Moreover, Palestine and its ongoing smouldering conflict had become a liability rather than an asset. While the Jewish *yishuv* was well-prepared for a potential British exodus after the war, the Palestinian leadership was divided. Amin al-Husayni had escaped arrest after the 1936 revolt and made it to Berlin, where he helped the Nazi propaganda machine, which did not make his nationalist movement in Palestine more popular with the British and other European powers. The opposition of al-Husayni consisted of the National Authority, dominated by the al-Nashashibi family and allied with the Hashemites in Transjordan.⁵⁵ The cities were dominated by a class composed of big landowners and merchants. There were no mass organizations which would require a clear ideology.⁵⁶

⁵¹Pappé 2006, p. 104.

⁵²Pappé 2006, p. 107.

⁵³Pappé 2006, p. 118.

⁵⁴Pappé 2006, p. 117.

⁵⁵Pappé 2006, p. 119.

⁵⁶Sayigh 2007, p. 58.

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Until the "final solution", i.e. the organised killing of Jews in concentration camps was formulated by the Nazi Third Reich in 1941, its strategy was the expulsion of Jews. Emigration from the Third Reich to Palestine during the years of the Second World War was opposed by the British, but encouraged by the Nazis, and facilitated by Jewish organisations which worked towards both legal and illegal immigration of Jews. From 1941 until the end of the Second World War, Jews were barred from emigration.⁵⁷

After the war, the numbers of Jews immigrating to Palestine went up, but the strict British immigration policies persisted until the end of the mandate, when immigration increased further. The atrocities of the shoah greatly increased the attractiveness of a Jewish state and an end to life in the diaspora. In 1947, the United Nations Special Committee On Palestine (UNSCOP) proposed the partition of Palestine. Its members were not experts on the situation in Palestine, but they were aware that the partition plan was opposed by the Arab leadership and common people alike.⁵⁸ The Zionist leaders welcomed both the committee and the partition plan. The forceful eviction of the Arab population from the designated Jewish state became a plan waiting to be put into action, and "the Yishuv's leaders felt confident enough to contemplate a take-over of fertile areas within the designated Arab state. This could be achieved in the event of an overall war without losing the international legitimacy of their new state." While the Yishuv was ready for the war that was about to follow, Palestinian leadership was undermined by having put diplomacy in the hands of the Arab League, which boycotted the UN, and secret negotiations by Abdallah of Transjordan to partition Palestine between the Jewish state and what was soon to become the Jordanian state.⁵⁹

After the partition plan was adopted by the UN, civil war ensued in Palestine. The eviction of Palestinians from the Jewish state began, soon followed by razing villages to the ground. The last British soldier left Palestine in 1948, without there being a clear plan for replacing the power vacuum that arose. Soon, Arab troops of volunteers sponsored by the Arab League arrived, and the Arab Legion, a part of the British Mandate police, also participated in the war.⁶⁰

The Arab forces attacked supply convoys and took East Jerusalem, including the Jewish quarter in the old city.⁶¹ The leaders of the soon-to-be Jewish state in a coordinated and effective war effort took over the structures left by the British, and the Jewish brigades forcefully removed as many Palestinians as possible from their evolving state.⁶² Moreover, the villages they seized were only left intact on rare occasions. The rest was razed to the ground. The mixed Jewish-Arab cities of Jaffa, Haifa, Safad and Tiberias were taken and

⁵⁷Cf. Ofer 1991.

⁵⁸While this is often framed as continued lack of cooperativity on the Palestinian side, the partition at the time could only be seen as unfavourable for the population they represented by any Arab politician.

⁵⁹Pappé 2006, pp. 124–125.

⁶⁰Pappé 2006, pp. 127–128.

⁶¹Pappé 2006, p. 130.

⁶²Sometimes, the Palestinians are depicted as leaving voluntarily by Zionist sources. This is contradicted by numerous accounts of Palestinians and disregards the terror and bloodshed committed by the Jewish brigades. Even where Palestinian civilians were officially invited to stay, people fled in fear of being attacked or killed.

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Figure 2.2.: Palestine during the British Mandate. Transjordan was separated from the British mandate of Palestine in 1922. ©PASSIA

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the Palestinian population evicted.⁶³

The Arab states entering the war were ill-prepared and more driven by a will to widen their sphere of influence in Palestine as much as they could rather than a wish to protect the Palestinian people. On 14th May 1948, the state of Israel was declared. It did not take long for the United States and Russia to recognise it. While the Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese troops, who had fought the Israeli soldiers to the north near the sea of Galilee did not make territorial gains, the West Bank and East Jerusalem were annexed by Jordan, and the Gaza strip by Egypt.⁶⁴

2.3. The *nakba* and the Israeli state

The events of 1948 are the most defining moment in Palestinian history and certainly the date that plays the biggest role in Palestinian self-perception. "In 1948 half of Palestine's 1.4 million Arabs were uprooted from their homes and became refugees, while the traditional Palestinian political and social leadership was scattered and discredited."⁶⁵ The traumatic experience of expulsion, refuge and non-return is passed on through generations of Palestinians in Palestine and the diaspora, and it is also the dividing line between the *ʿarab tamanye w ʿarabīn* who became Israeli citizens and the rest of Palestinians, who are not. "Out of about 850,000 Palestinians living in the territories designated by the UN as a Jewish state, only 160,000 remained on or nearby their land and homes. Those who remained became the Palestinian minority in Israel. The rest were expelled or fled under the threat of expulsion, and a few thousand died in massacres."⁶⁶

"The rupture in Palestinian collective life also produced four distinct populations: Palestinians in diaspora, refugees, Palestinians inside Israel, and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza."⁶⁷ Nowadays, the populations of the West Bank and Gaza can be considered separate from each other as well, since there is no freedom of travel.

A large number of refugee camps were set up throughout the Gaza strip, the West Bank as well as in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The United Nations Reliefs and Work Agency (UNRWA) was established and provided the refugees and internally displaced persons with basic necessities. Repatriation was decreed in UN Resolution 194, but this was never put into action. Israel became a member of the UN, and peace negotiations to solve the question of Palestine - repatriation, what to do with Jerusalem, and how to fairly partition the land between the Jewish and the Arab states, were to no avail.⁶⁸ The Israeli government prevented repatriation by destruction or Jewish take-over of Palestinian houses whose owners had fled, and even continued the expulsion of Arabs from villages. Many of the new settlers were Arab Jews. "[Israeli] Foreign Ministry officials sought to persuade the international community that a population exchange⁶⁹ of a kind had

⁶³Pappé 2006, p. 129.

⁶⁴Pappé 2006, pp. 131–133.

⁶⁵Khalidi 2010, p. 21.

⁶⁶Pappé 2006, p. 137.

⁶⁷Aboubakr 2017, p. 219.

⁶⁸Pappé 2006, p. 142.

⁶⁹i.e. the expulsion of the Palestinians in exchange for Arab Jews increasingly unwanted in their home

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taken place, and that there was no need to search any longer for a solution to the refugee problem."⁷⁰ Naturally, this is not a view shared by Palestinians. On the contrary, the "right to return" has developed a life of its own as a politicising force, slogan and symbolic realm. Its importance by far transcends the milieu of refugees, as all of Palestine was impacted by the upheaval and forced migration of 1948. Thus, it plays a role in Nablus as well. Around Nablus, there are three refugee camps that exist to this day: Balāṭa, Bēt ʿĒn il-Māʿ and ʿAskar.

In the West Bank, Jordanian policy discouraged urban development and encouraged agriculture. Agricultural land was subject to low taxes, which benefitted land-owners and prevented them from selling for urban purposes. Families such as the Nimrs in Nablus profited greatly from this strategy. This further increased the gap between camp-dwellers and the better-off socioeconomic strata. As the realm of economics was taken over by the old notable families, politics became the domain of the young and the poor. The Palestinians in the West Bank felt increasingly that Jordan was an occupying power.⁷¹

By the 1950s, a new national consciousness had risen particularly in the refugee camps, "centered around the mythical figure of the Palestinian fighter (*fidāʿī*)." This was aided to some extent by Muslim Brotherhood networks. The Fataḥ developed from such *fidāʿī* cadres, and (often violent and random) political activism spread to other cities with a significant Palestinian population. The "old" nationalist movement lost ground to Islamic and leftist movements. It is important to note that violence against Palestinians did continue after 1948. This was one of the reasons why resistance grew strong.⁷²

The shifted leadership dynamics amounted to an upheaval in the traditional, patriarchal structures of society. The young were the leading force in this new nationalist movement, and seniority as well as clan structures were challenged in their power of defining hierarchy.⁷³

The Suez crisis in 1956 affected Israel more than the West Bank Palestinians. The leadership had expansion on their minds, and the Arab world was seen as intrinsically hostile towards Israel. The Suez crisis was a joint Israeli, French and British attempt to oust Nasser in Egypt. Open war broke out after a retaliation strike by Israel on the Gaza strip, which at the time was still occupied by Egypt. Israel was victorious in the conflict, but eventually had to retreat to the 1948 borders. However, the brief occupation of the Gaza strip was a setback for the *fidāʿīyyūn*.⁷⁴

In 1964, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) as an umbrella organisation geared at the liberation of Palestine through armed struggle was founded.⁷⁵ It was still dominated by the old league of notables. However, in the refugee camps, other factions were more successful. Besides armed operations, efforts in other fields received renewed attention. In setting up an infrastructure that would sustain not only armed operations,

countries

⁷⁰Pappé 2006, p. 145.

⁷¹Pappé 2006, pp. 152–153.

⁷²Pappé 2006, pp. 147–149.

⁷³Pappé 2006, p. 151.

⁷⁴Pappé 2006, pp. 160–162.

⁷⁵Coates Ulrichsen 2018.

but also a civilian life, Fatah gained supporters. It was an expression of the new and young nationalist movement, and apart from the establishment of a Palestinian state and deleting Israel from the map, it was hard to locate on a political left-to-right spectrum.^[76] In Lebanon, George Habash formed the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).^[77]

2.4. 1967 to the First Intifāḍa

The catastrophic 1967 war that led to the occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza strip, the Golan heights and the Sinai peninsula was preceded by war rhetoric and a race for military rearmament that included investment in weapons of mass destruction at the expense of social welfare. The situation at the Israeli-Syrian border, an area disputed since 1949, escalated and Egypt was prompted to intervene. Israel's victory was complete and the dream of creating a Greater Israel that includes the West Bank seemed to have come true. The occupied areas were placed under military rule. Subsequently, the construction of settlements in the occupied territories began, contrary to international law. Once again, parts of the population were uprooted and the refugee camps' population greatly increased.^[78] There was also mass emigration on the part of West Bank Palestinians to the Gulf States.^[79] In the Palestinian collective memory, this is referred to as the *naksa*, "setback".

UN security council resolution 242 called for an Israeli retreat from the occupied territories in exchange for Arab recognition of Israel's borders (the so-called "land-for-peace" approach).^[80] This was rejected by the Arab League in the Khartoum resolution (containing the infamous "three nos: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel").^[81]

Every act suspicious of being a "resistance" act was severely punished in the name of security, sometimes by brutal collective punishment like the destruction of houses.^[82] "From the beginning of the occupation, international jurists commented on the illegitimacy of the Israeli resolution to maintain the territories as an occupied area without adhering to the requirements sanctioned by the Geneva Convention for the treatment of such areas."^[83]

Some Palestinians in the occupied territories, especially the poor, were able to better their economic situation as they joined the booming Israeli economy as workers. A quarter of workers in the industry were Palestinians in the 1970s, both from the occupied territories and from within Israel, and half of the workers in construction and agriculture were Palestinians, sometimes badly paid and treated. The Palestinian economy also

⁷⁶Pappé 2006, 163f.

⁷⁷Pappé 2006, pp. 166–167.

⁷⁸Pappé 2006, 184ff.

⁷⁹Pappé 2006, p. 204.

⁸⁰**Resolution 242.**

⁸¹*Khartoum Resolutions of September 1967* n.d.

⁸²Pappé 2006, p. 195.

⁸³Pappé 2006, p. 197.

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Figure 2.3.: The Middle East in 1967. As of June 1967, Israel had conquered and occupied the Sinai peninsula, the Golan heights as well as the Gaza strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. ©PASSIA

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profited from the opportunity to export to Israel.⁸⁴

In the aftermath of the war, the PLO was taken over by the *muqāwama*-alliance headed by Fataḥ, and Yassir Arafat installed as the leader instead of Ahmad al-Shuqairi, who was one of the faces of a more established, more conservative leadership. Pan-Arab control was rejected and the need for struggle emphasized. Of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) that constituted another faction in the new PLO, the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP) formed as a splinter group. An era of violent acts⁸⁵, including the abduction of airplanes, or the hostage-taking and murdering of Israeli athletes at the 1972 olympics in Munich, and guerilla war began⁸⁶.

Unlike former nationalist movements, "this nationalist elite put education and welfare on its list of priorities, and therefore had much more popular support, even given its failures, which were many." It had a good standing in the refugee camps. Attacks were often launched from Jordan until 1970, when Jordan finally clamped down on PLO fighters in a bloodbath dubbed "Black September", *ṭaylūl al-ḥaswad*, that brought the region to the brink of war again. PLO guerilla activities shifted to Lebanon, a pretext for the Lebanon war that was about to follow.⁸⁷

The United States entered the scene as a prospective peace broker and supplier of arms to Israel, motivated by limiting Soviet influence in the Middle East. The UN issued a Resolution 242 calling on Israel to retreat from all occupied territories in exchange for peace with its Arab neighbours.⁸⁸

The 1973 war between Egypt, Syria and Israel, which was aided by Great Britain and France, led to a stand-off that initiated the peace process between Egypt and Israel, completed in 1979. Israel withdrew from the Sinai peninsula.⁸⁹ A "Jordanian option" for peace was also under discussion: part of the West Bank should be incorporated into the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan in exchange for a peace agreement. This option failed.⁹⁰ It became clear that Israel could not be removed, while at the same time it was obvious that some degree of support in the region was necessary if Israel was to ever achieve any

⁸⁴Pappé 2006, pp. 202–203.

⁸⁵I decided not to refer to any acts under the label of "terrorism", which I had originally intended to do. Terrorism is defined by the proposed Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism of the UN as causing death or serious bodily injury to any person or damage to private and public property with the purpose of intimidating a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing something. In many definitions, those acts being committed by non-state actors is stressed. The member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation proposed the exclusion of self-determination movements from this convention. While this is a definition I find convincing, not including the latter point, it can also be plausibly argued that in the conflict in case, "terrorism" is not only a term that is historically charged to denote non-Western actors, but it also puts blame on one side, which can be subsumed under the label of "terrorism" and leaves the other without such a label to match. Therefore, it creates the impression of an unbalanced standpoint, which is why I omitted it from this thesis. This does not change my condemnation of violence.

⁸⁶Pappé 2006, pp. 191–192.

⁸⁷Pappé 2006, pp. 192–193.

⁸⁸Pappé 2006, p. 205.

⁸⁹Pappé 2006, p. 206.

⁹⁰Pappé 2006, p. 209.

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kind of peaceful existence.

The PLO was gradually adopted internationally as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and liberation of the occupied territories took priority over other matters such as the refugee question. Fatah took a more diplomatic and pragmatic course of action, unlike other factions.⁹¹ South Lebanon was the most important stage of PLO actions, but it got entangled in the Lebanese civil war, which Israel joined in the 1982 invasion, hoping to install a pro-Israel Maronite government in Beirut and get rid of the PLO, which evacuated to Tunis.⁹² The war in Lebanon cost many Israeli soldiers their lives and sparked wide-spread opposition within Israel. It was also the scene of the infamous massacres in Sabra and Shatila, where hundreds of Palestinian refugees were slaughtered by the Maronite Phalangist militia, "encouraged and incited by Israeli military officers of the highest rank", among them later prime minister Ariel Sharon.⁹³

The situation before the 1987 first intifāda was one of economic dependence and gradual annexation of territories through settlements. While the occupied territories exported labour and some basic commodities, they depended on the import of Israeli goods and received little investment in their welfare. Unemployment was high. Doing business was made hard due to an opaque system of permits and concessions.⁹⁴

Any showing of nationalism, such as flying the Palestinian flag, was suppressed and declared an inflammatory act. Israel listed the PLO as a terrorist organisation. When the *Intifāda* broke out, the Palestinian universities had been shut down for four years. The incursions into the private, public and intellectual life sparked a grassroots movement. "The intifada was made possible through the efforts of urban-based Palestinians whose affiliation and even sympathies with the PLO were, for the most part, at best tentative. As compared to the PLO's stalwarts of the liberation struggle, the new activists formed somewhat of a counter-elite that was university educated, often hailed from smaller towns or the countryside, was numerically more preponderant, and called for social as well as political transformation of Palestinian society. Within the counter-elite, authority devolved downward, thus helping to sustain the intifada over time."⁹⁵

It started in the Gaza refugee camps and spread all over Israel and Palestine. The economically hard living conditions the Palestinians found themselves in were a fertile ground for revolt on one hand, but on the other hand also produced collaborators with Israel, who were despised by the population as traitors and punished harshly. The scene of action once again was rural Palestine, where peasants threw stones at Israeli soldiers and flew Palestinian flags. The Palestinians in Israel swiftly joined the revolution and for the first time, the agenda on both sides of the "Green Line"⁹⁶ was the same, and urban populations recognised their shared fate with the rural ones more than before. The villages suffered the brunt of retaliation.⁹⁷

⁹¹Pappé 2006, p. 216.

⁹²Pappé 2006, p. 219.

⁹³Pappé 2006, p. 221.

⁹⁴Pappé 2006, p. 232.

⁹⁵Kamrava 2016, pp. 51–52.

⁹⁶The border between Israel and the designated Palestinian territories.

⁹⁷Pappé 2006, pp. 233–235.

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Women played a significant role in the first intifāḍa. Gender issues became part of a broad political discussion. Children and youth were another vital part of the uprising. It was a grassroots rather than an elitist movement. Trade unions were important organisational structures in the cities, while in rural areas, popular committees played a big role.⁹⁸ The centre of action moved to the occupied territories, and part of it was a "back-to-the-land movement".⁹⁹ For example, maintaining food production was a deliberate socio-political movement in the 1970s and 1980s in Palestine, when at the same time more and more people gave up their work in agriculture to join the Palestinian workforce in Israel.¹⁰⁰

Kamrava attributes the growing Islamisation that the Palestinian society underwent in the course of the Intifāḍa to three factors: the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 that gave rise to popular political Islam, an increase in the numbers and influence of mosques, and Israel underestimating the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate Ḥamās that declared its formation a few months after the Intifāḍa had started as a movement that would detract followers from the PLO - but not become a threat itself.¹⁰¹

Despite the various political factions that played a role in the intifāḍa and which held different beliefs, the common enemy in the form of the occupying power held them together. In the general perception, this was a time when Palestinians were unified and fighting for the same goal. Differences of class, gender, and religion were overcome.

"In February 1988, Minister of Defense Yitzhak Rabin, whom the Norwegian Nobel Committee would subsequently crown a hero, gave the army the order to break the limbs of the youth revolting in the streets of the West Bank and Gaza."¹⁰² The Israeli prisons were filled to the brim with Palestinian prisoners, many of them very young. New detention centres were opened.¹⁰³ The harsh clampdown on youth politicised even those uninvolved prior to that.

The PLO, operating at the time from exile in Tunis, issued the Declaration of Independence. It tried to use the momentum of the uprising against the occupation to direct it towards a broader Palestinian agenda.¹⁰⁴ The declaration was met with enthusiasm, but when peace talks were announced, some factions like Ḥamās and the PFLP rejected them because they saw them as betraying the intifāḍa by negotiating with the enemy on unequal terms, while others welcomed them.¹⁰⁵

The talks in Madrid and Washington, followed by the peace talks in Oslo, nonetheless were a hopeful point in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. However, while internationally viewed largely positively, they suffered from what Khalidi in hindsight describes as "crippling limitations" in what was part of those negotiations. The settlements, access to water, the end point of the occupation, the refugee question were all left out of the

⁹⁸Pappé 2006, pp. 237–238.

⁹⁹Kamrava 2016, p. 53.

¹⁰⁰Rickard 2013, p. 5.

¹⁰¹Kamrava 2016, p. 54.

¹⁰²Farraj 2017, p. 89.

¹⁰³Farraj 2017, p. 87.

¹⁰⁴Pappé 2006, p. 339.

¹⁰⁵Farraj 2019, pp. 94–95.

agreements reached.¹⁰⁶

The reason why the PLO agreed to engage in peace talks in the first place was its fear of becoming irrelevant in the face of potential leadership structures such as the Unified Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) and Ḥamās, who both had better ties to the people in the occupied territories than the exiled elite that was the PLO.¹⁰⁷ Even though the PLO had started out as a counter-movement to the old establishment, especially from the period after the 1990s onward, they came to be seen as disconnected from the general public and corrupt. Living conditions had deteriorated for Palestinians throughout the first intifāda, and the line between armed resistance and ordinary crime had become blurry.¹⁰⁸

2.5. The Oslo accords and the Second Intifāda

Eventually, a declaration of intentions was issued after negotiations between an Israeli pragmatist government that was willing to vacate the occupied territories and the PLO on the grounds that they accept the partition of Palestine. The major topics of the conflict were left for future negotiations: the question of Jerusalem, the right of return for the Palestinian refugees, and the problem of Jewish settlements. Before such negotiations could take place, Israel created facts on the ground by investing in the expansion of settlements and creating bypass highways that connected them but cut through the Palestinian territories, leading to a "cantonization". This not only prevented a more wholesome agreement, but also contradicted the agreements reached in the Oslo accords.¹⁰⁹

The accords led to the establishment of three types of "areas": area A under the control of the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA), area B as a transitional area, with Palestinian administrative control but Israeli military control, and area C under complete sovereignty of Israel. Khalidi describes the "fiction of the PA" as follows: "This is a virtual body that does not have sovereignty, jurisdiction, or ultimate control."¹¹⁰ Area A makes up about 3% of the West Bank, while Area B constitutes about 24%, and Area C about 73%.¹¹¹ according to Kamrava.¹¹² In all areas, "[...] Israeli authorities have full external security control. This means that the Israeli military retains the right to enter these areas at any time, typically to raid homes or detain individuals under the pretext of security."¹¹³

Thus, rights of executive power, including the security of the Jewish settlements, and a right to veto Palestinian laws, were kept in Israel's hands. Likewise, Israel controlled all traffic, commercial and personal, between Gaza and the West Bank, as well as travels to

¹⁰⁶Khalidi 2010, p. xviii.

¹⁰⁷Kamrava 2016, p. 55.

¹⁰⁸Farraj 2019, p. 94.

¹⁰⁹Pappé 2006, pp. 241–243.

¹¹⁰Khalidi 2010, p. xxiii.

¹¹¹The exact size of each area is disputed.

¹¹²Kamrava 2016, p. 56.

¹¹³What are areas A, B, and C of the occupied West Bank? 25.01.2021.

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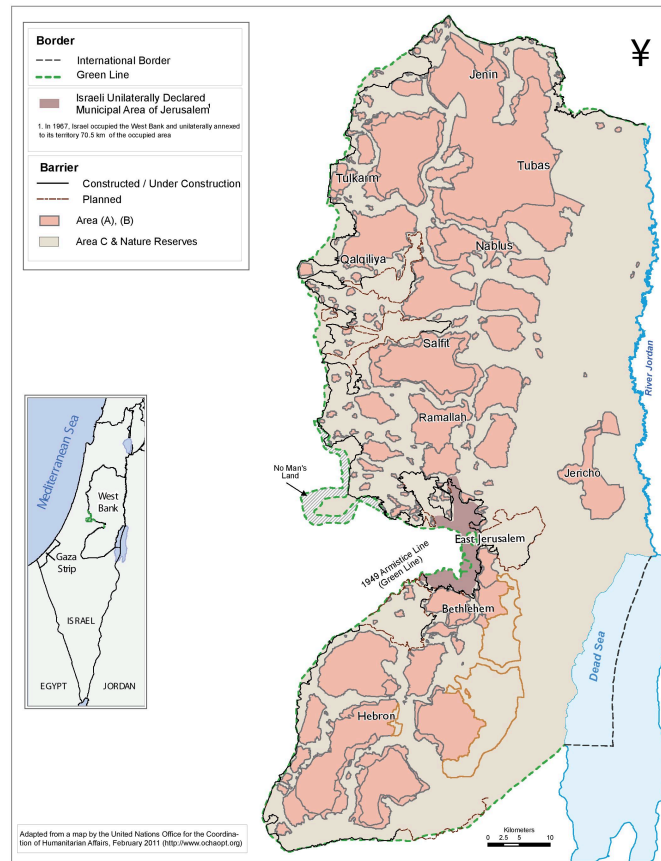


Figure 2.4.: Areas A&B and area C in 2014. ©PASSIA

Jordan and Israel. It also maintained authority over custom fees and taxes.¹¹⁴

"[The PA] was unable to consolidate itself as a central Palestinian authority because of economic dependence on Israel, the division of the West Bank and Gaza into noncontiguous enclaves, and the continued separation of the West Bank and Gaza.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the PA has frequently been accused of helping the vested interests of the few at the expense of the many.¹¹⁶

The most horrific effect of the Oslo accords, however, was that the populations the West Bank and especially Gaza found themselves locked in their respective enclaves, while Israeli border control restricted movement outside of them as resistance to the Oslo accords by Ḥamās and the Islamic Jihad movements resulted in bombings.¹¹⁷ Religion provided some sense of coherence in a situation of constant uprooting and threat. In some instances, it also justified radical political action and acts considered as terrorist

¹¹⁴Kamrava 2016, p. 57.

¹¹⁵Taraki et al. 2006, p. xxviii.

¹¹⁶Kamal 2015, p. 10.

¹¹⁷Pappé 2006, p. 245.

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acts. "While there were other explanations of why Israelis and Palestinians resorted to such forms of violence, such as old grudges, the violence tended to be represented as part of a divine mission."¹¹⁸

The Israeli military was not removed from control over the Palestinian territories. Rather, it was redeployed. "Instead of remaining inside the Palestinian cities, Israeli forces were now deployed around them, with the ability to enter a city whenever they wanted [...]. [...]he settlements also still surround Palestinian cities, and Palestinians have no control over their natural resources especially water [...]."¹¹⁹

In 1996, elections were held in the Palestinian territories. A pragmatically-oriented Fatah won the majority of seats. They were ready to negotiate compromises with Israel for their retraction to the before '67 borders. Peace efforts were futile in containing popular opposition to the post-Oslo situation on the Palestinian side and security concerns on the Israeli side. Moreover, the right-wing Likud under Benjamin Netanyahu came to power in Israel. After the Camp David negotiations failed, the second intifāda broke out in 2000.¹²⁰

The spark that lit the flame was a visit by opposition leader Ariel Sharon to the temple mount/*al-ḥaram aš-šarif*, which was perceived as a deliberate provocation to Palestinians. When they went out to protest, they were met by fully-armed border police who shot 13 of them dead. This event united Palestinian militias from all political factions, as well as bridging once again the gap between Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza strip. The second intifāda, unlike the first, had a decidedly religious spin. It was violent and infamous for suicide bombings as its principle method. It had a devastating effect on the lives of Palestinians as well as Israeli Jews.¹²¹

It was more violent and less inclusive than the first intifāda, and it was not only in protest against the situation imposed on the Palestinians by Israel, but also further incited by a rift that ran through Palestinian society itself, right between the old elite that had clung to power at the expense of a more comprehensive solution of the conflict with Israel and a more democratic and less police-state like leadership style and the people they had failed. "[...]he second intifada, which started in 2000, failed to emulate the largely unarmed, grassroots-based mass movement of its predecessor. It turned increasingly to the use of arms and then degenerated into suicide bombing attacks inside Israel. Besides being morally indefensible, this proved to be a terrible strategic error." (Khalidi 2010:xxi)

The methods employed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)¹²² were a brutal retaliation for the anxiety Israel had suffered because of the suicide attacks. This retaliation was not very targeted and caused many civilian casualties. "The high number of civilians killed and the circumstances in which they died indicate that the IDF made an insufficient effort to reduce such casualties. Many occurred in non-combat incidents."¹²³

In the re-occupied cities, a curfew was imposed. In April 2002, Nablus was completely

¹¹⁸Pappé 2006, p. 246.

¹¹⁹Kamal 2015, p. 10.

¹²⁰Pappé 2006, p. 274.

¹²¹Pappé 2006, p. 277.

¹²²This is a euphemism for the Israeli military. Many Palestinians make a point of not using it.

¹²³Operation Defensive Shield. Soldiers' Testimonies. Palestinian Testimonies September 2002, p. 4.

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shut down for three weeks, and this was the case again for three months, June to October 2002. "During this period no one could leave their homes, and under the curfew not even a peek from a window was possible without the risk of being shot by Israeli soldiers."¹²⁴

The suicide bombings that were a key strategy in the second intifāda produced a "yearning for normalcy that expressed itself as the desire for the physical disappearance of the Palestinians from the Israeli midst."¹²⁵ The construction of a wall separating the West Bank from Israel was begun. This had the "side-effect" of incorporating more land into Israel proper. In 2002, Israel re-occupied most of the territories it had left, including the major Palestinian cities in the West Bank. This was named "Operation Defensive Shield". It was effective in preventing suicide attacks, but the renewed occupation caused the further rise of radical groups.¹²⁶ This is not to mention the harm it did to Palestinian social life and economy. The wall cuts through West Bank territory, *de facto* annexes 10% of it¹²⁷, and separates farmers from their land¹²⁸.

Arafat was isolated in Ramallah and died in 2004, after his health had deteriorated, causing much speculation about him being poisoned.¹²⁹

All Israeli soldiers were pulled out of Gaza and all settlements there, in addition to four isolated settlements in the West Bank, were dismantled in 2005. This proved insignificant to the peace process.¹³⁰ It is even perceived to have further worsened the situation of Gazans, who were now locked in what is frequently described as an "open air prison".¹³¹ The same year, Mahmoud Abbas was elected president, but in elections that were boycotted by Ḥamās and the Islamic Jihad.¹³²

A whole "discourse of separation" has evolved. Ehud Barak has called for "peace through separation", while Palestinians and those sympathetic with their cause call out this practice as "Apartheid", a term originally used in the South African context but now applied to the "Apartheid wall" and the different treatment of Jewish and Arab citizens of Palestine as well as Jewish Israelis in comparison to Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.¹³³ While internationally, the focus still lies on a two-state solution to the conflict, intellectuals familiar with the area are increasingly voicing their support for a one-state solution. The main obstacle for this is the declaration of Israel as a "Jewish state".¹³⁴

In 2006, Ḥamās won 44% of votes in the elections for the Palestine Legislative Council, which through the Palestinian electoral system granted them the majority of seats. This resulted in international sanctions against the joint Fataḥ-Ḥamās government, because of

¹²⁴Kamal [2015], p. 11.

¹²⁵Tamari [2013], p. 54.

¹²⁶Pappé [2006], p. 290.

¹²⁷Kamrava [2016], p. 60.

¹²⁸See for example <https://www.972mag.com/photos-how-israels-wall-keeps-palestinian-farmers-off-their-land/>

¹²⁹Pappé [2006], p. 287.

¹³⁰Pappé [2006], p. 291.

¹³¹Kamrava [2016], p. 62.

¹³²Kamrava [2016], p. 66.

¹³³Kamal [2015], pp. 3–4.

¹³⁴See for example the writings of Ilan Pappé, Ghada Karmi and many more. Others, like Judith and Reiner Bernstein and Noam Chomsky are proponents of the two-state solution.

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Ḥamās' unrelenting policy of non-recognition of Israel. In 2007, the conflict between the two parties spiraled into fighting. The Israeli "Operation Cast Lead" in the Gaza strip, a retaliatory strike that cost thousands of Palestinians their lives, was deemed against the international law "to take all feasible precautions in the choice of means and method of attack with a view to avoiding and in any event minimizing incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects."¹³⁵

Despite efforts for reconciliation, the Ḥamās-Fataḥ split has dominated Palestinian politics ever since. It has also alienated the Ḥamās-governed Gaza strip from the PA-governed West Bank. An exchange of rocket fire from the Gaza strip and retaliatory strikes by Israel has become commonplace and rarely even makes international news any more. The latest escalations of the Gaza conflict were in 2014, 2018, early 2019¹³⁶ and 2021, the most recent flare-up of the conflict involving Palestinian citizens of Israel in an unprecedented manner. Nonetheless, it has been predominantly framed as a conflict between a terrorist Ḥamās in Gaza and Israel in media coverage.¹³⁷

The electoral mandates of 2006 have long run out, but the persons holding them remain in office. Elections had been announced for spring 2021, but expectations regarding a fundamental change have been low from the start. The main obstacle to the success of peace talks remains the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, in recent years accompanied by plans to annex the settled territories into Israel proper and escalated by the USA's Trump administration, which recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2018.

Before the latest escalation of the conflict, a rapprochement between the PA and Ḥamās had seemed to have come closer. This would have shown national unity and might have bettered Palestine's negotiating position in future peace talks. The normalisation between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan put Palestine and especially Ḥamās under increased pressure to reach an agreement before all its allies are gone.¹³⁸

The elections have been indefinitely postponed. At the time of writing this thesis, a fragile ceasefire has been reached between Israel and Ḥamās in the Gaza strip. The issue of Šēḫ Ġarrāḥ, the neighbourhood in East Jerusalem where Palestinian families are being evicted because Israelis claim the property was Jewish before 1948, which was one of the triggers for the escalation of the conflict, remains unresolved.

A country's history is key for understanding the identity or identities its inhabitants perform. The fact that Palestinians never achieved a sovereign national state greatly shapes their self-perception, and it is perhaps the most defining factor for their handling of material and intellectual heritage. Soap is regarded as a part of Nabulsi heritage, but also as a part of Palestinian heritage. This double role will be illuminated in further chapters, but the history of Palestine is what underlies all treatments of Palestinian identity.

¹³⁵ Kamrava 2016, pp. 63–64.

¹³⁶ *Encyclopædia Britannica: Palestine* 2020.

¹³⁷ Ḥamās is listed a terrorist organisation by Israel, the USA and the EU, among others. In Palestine, it is naturally perceived differently. My impression was that it is seen as a political faction that some disagree with, but certainly not as one that lacks legitimacy more than other factions.

¹³⁸ *Hamas scrambles for relevance in post-normalization Middle East* 25.01.2021.

3. Narrating Nablus

Seven Nabulsi generously shared their time and let me conduct interviews with them. This thesis is not primarily concerned with historical accuracy, but with the narratives that are formed around historical events and cultural practices. The chapters that follow contextualise the interviewees' stories in the broader frame of identity and heritage, and the last chapter discusses several topics found in the interviews in detail.

All interviews in this chapter were conducted between autumn 2020 and spring 2021 over various videocall platforms or over the phone. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

The interviews followed a loose protocol that can be found in the appendix, but they allowed for spontaneous information and extension in the course of the conversation. In fact, great emphasis has been put on those spontaneous bits and pieces as they, in my opinion, represent even better what my interviewees deemed relevant or important than a strict question-and-answer format. Each conversation was recorded.

After getting familiar with the content of all interviews, I defined eight categories, provided here with an explanation of what they comprise. The label of each category is to be understood as a "working title".

- Heritage. Every mention of Nabulsi and Palestinian heritage, either prompted by a question or told in the course of other stories.
- Nostalgia. Utterances that refer to the past or changes that have happened, usually but not always mentioned in a nostalgic manner.
- Local divisions. Differences between Nablus and other Palestinian cities, usually Ramallah and Hebron.
- Soap. Quite self-explanatorily all mentions of soap, descriptions of its production and of how it relates to the city as well as if and how soap is used in everyday life.
- Şumūd. Both the mention of the terms *şumūd*, *muqāwame* or their English counterparts "steadfastness" and "resistance", as well as descriptions of and allusions to everyday resistance and the intifāda¹.
- Trust, Warmth, Help. Descriptions of the social network as strong and built on trust. Without exception, when asked directly, my interviewees mentioned those traits.

¹lit. "shaking off". In the Palestinian context, two popular uprisings against the Israeli occupation (1987-1993 and 2000-2005) are referred to as the first and second intifāda

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- Internal differences. Social, religious and class divisions within Nablus.

I also allowed for a category "Miscellaneous" to include what did not fit any category but I found remarkable, interesting or otherwise relevant.

This method facilitated having a full conversation with the person I was talking to while still being able to extract the parts that directly benefitted the thesis. The content of the interviews naturally had to be condensed to include only the relevant sections, thereby gaining a corpus that was both comprehensive and manageable².

Subsequently, the extracted text was structured so each interviewee's story is presented in roughly the same fashion and order of topics, thus enabling cross-reading and highlighting similarities and differences, as well as contradictions within the narration of each speaker. This does not reflect the order the person told me the information. Since my main goal was to extract meaning and compare the different perceptions and therefore different narratives of my interviewees, this was the method I chose. In order to do so, I needed to structure the content of the interviews according to the framework I came up with, which is why I found it more honest to present paraphrases in third-person speech, with occasional direct quotes, instead of giving first-person accounts. This way, it is clear that there is a third person involved as a middlewoman between the speaker and the reader. I chose this mode of presentation to make clear that I have not altered the content of the interview, but I have altered the way of presenting the content.

The texts presented here are structured along the following questions:

- Who is this person?
- Where did they grow up?
- What place do they consider very Nabulsi and why?
- What objects or things do they consider very Nabulsi and why?
- What is the first thing that comes to their mind when they think of Nabulsi soap?
- What makes Nabulsi soap special?
- What are the practical aspects of soap?
- What can they tell me about soap making and the soap factories?
- According to them, is Nabulsi soap a source of pride?
- What can they tell me about local divisions between Nablus and other Palestinian cities?
- What is the connection of soap to heritage and identity in their opinion?

²At the same time, this method also constrained me to leave out parts not directly relevant. All the interviews were fascinating to me and I deeply regret not being able to present their content in its entirety.

3. Narrating Nablus

- What do they tell me about the alleged rebelliousness of Nablus?
- Do they mention *ṣumūd* or *muqāwame*?
- According to them, what makes the social networks in Nablus special?
- What is the connection of soap to old and established families in Nablus?
- Do they mention conflicts within Nablus? Conflicts of class? Conflicts of who belongs and who does not?
- Do they perceive a difference between Nabulsi and Palestinian heritage and what is the relationship between the two?
- Is there something else they tell me about Nabulsi heritage?
- What has been or is the best time for Nablus as a city in all of its history and why?
- What has been or is the worst time for Nablus as a city in all of its history and why?

Both in eliciting and in presenting the texts, I am not concerned with "truth", "objectivity" or "facts". I am not trying to gain reliable information, historical dates or faithful accounts of processes. Rather, the stories that are the underlying basis of identity are what is of interest in a person's account of past and present. It is therefore understood that information given to me by my interviewees cannot be "corrected" or "fact-checked", as for the purpose of this thesis, the focus is on *what people know* and *what people remember* and *what people think* on a personal level, all of which cannot be checked against "true" or "false" as categories.

Lastly, I would like to add that this chapter was the last to be written, followed only by the discussion of its contents, found at the end of the thesis.

3.1. Marwa

Marwa is 20 years old, and she introduces herself as “a photographer and clown”. She later sends me adorable pictures proving the latter. When I say I would like to record our talk, she quickly runs to get her *ḥiğāb*, until I reassure her I will only do a voice recording. She tells me she also works as a tour guide, taking students, tourists, guys, girls, you name it, around the old city. She strikes me as a bubbly and cheerful person.

Marwa grew up in Rās il-ʿAyn. This area is close to the *balad*³. She says she loves it very much, but in old times, it was much prettier, full of trees and plants. Now it is just all streets and buildings. The people who live there have remained almost the same since her childhood, but of course, they have changed a little.

A place that is very “Nabulsi” for Marwa is the *bāb is-sāḥa*, with its clock tower in the old city.

³The old city, referred to as *il-balad*, *il-balda*, *il-balda il-ʿadīme* and sometimes *il-balad il-ʿadīme*.

3. Narrating Nablus

For Marwa, there are of course many things that represent Nablus, for example the soap and *knāfe*, but Nablus is the city most famous for its soap.

The first thing that comes to Marwa's mind when I we talk about Nabulsi soap is "cleanliness". What makes Nabulsi soap special is that it does not have any perfume. Its smell is natural and pure, you can smell the olives when you open it.

In her house, they use only Nabulsi soap. She does not distinguish between those brands made in Nablus, they are all the same to her. When I ask her if she uses the soap for emotional or practical reasons, she says she grew up with it. Moreover, her grandfather used to be a soap-maker. It is also good quality soap, and it cleans well. She knows that people clean their houses using Nabulsi soap in the form of powder.

The ones who buy Nabulsi soap most are foreigners. Marwa says: "*ana lamma kunt ʔāxud maḡmūʕa fiha ʔaḡānib, awwal iši byisʔalūna ʕanno, min wēn ništari šābūne. mustaḥl tlāʔi ʔaḡnabi, tiḡi ʕa Nāblus mā byištari šābūne.*", "Whenever I took a group [on a guided tour] that had foreigners, the first thing they asked about was 'where do we buy soap'? It is impossible to find a foreigner who comes to Nablus and does not buy a piece of soap." In Nablus itself, not everybody of the younger generation still uses the soap.

Marwa's family keeps a ball-shaped soap she proudly shows me as a memory. Her grandfather made it 50 years ago. Her grandfather and father both worked in soap production, not as workers, but as producers. When she tells people that, they are awed. It is really something one is proud of, she tells me.

Her paternal aunt told Marwa how soap was made, because her father, Marwa's grandfather, used to produce soap. She tells me that they used to put olive oil, soda, salt and water in a vessel. The soap factory consisted of two stories, on the first floor, they make the dough for soap, on the second they spread the soap, cut it and stack it. All this happens in the heart of the factory, which is the second floor. Then a machine packages the soap, or in former days, they did this by hand.

The historical significance of soap according to Marwa and her mother, whom she quickly ushered in to help her out, is that it is a very, very old craft and that it is still done by hand. There were more than 30 soap factories. People are very proud of the factories, because making soap was a *mihne asāsiyye*, "essential profession".

Marwa knows the "Nabulsi" soap factory is still in use, but of the great number, according to her, only two or three are still operating. The reason for this decline is that there are now a lot of different kinds of soap, and Nabulsi soap has ceased to be the only one available.

Every soap factory is registered in a family name, and the name is displayed on the factory.

Soap for Marwa does belong in the realm of heritage, but unfortunately it does not provide great profit and many turn to better opportunities. Marwa says that every Palestinian city has its own heritage. All of them combined make up the heritage of the country. Songs are heritage, and what a city produces is also heritage. Marwa has friends in Dubai who told her that the soap is exported to Dubai, and she has also heard that it is sold in Germany as well in a little shop.

Asked about what distinguishes the people of Nablus from the inhabitants of other cities, Marwa says that *Nablus byixtilif ʕan zamān*, "Nablus is different from what it was

3. Narrating Nablus

like in former days", and that she would be better able to tell me what makes its people special if we were talking about the old times.

What makes Nablus special as a city is that it has traditions that speak of the city's religious ties, and Marwa says they celebrate *il-mawlid an-nabawi* more than any other city in Palestine. Marwa says there are also non-religious practices specific to Nablus, like the *istiqbāl*, where every month it is another woman's turn to invite all her female relatives and neighbours for a party. They would sing traditional songs and chat. Marwa says this is an old tradition that is not really practiced any more, but people have recently become very interested in such traditions and she herself is trying to promote it. According to Marwa, the *istiqbāl* is a Damascene tradition that Nablus has taken on. Nablus is also called "little Damascus". Marwa thinks that Nablus and Damascus are not only very much alike geographically, but they are also alike language-wise. There is another tradition, it is called "is-sūq nāzil", and it is a festivity the day before Ramaḍān is announced. This tradition is only Nabulsi. All people gather in the old city, they sing *anāšīd ramadān* and *anāšīd dīniyye*, "ramadān hymns" and "religious hymns".

There is also a group in Nablus called *ʿiddet iṣ-ṣēx Naẓmi*, they are a *ṣūfi* group that plays the *ṭabla* at festivities, formerly *is-sūq nāzil* and now for *il-mawlid in-nabawi*.⁴

None of the beautiful traditions are done anymore, according to Marwa, except when people are acting out a scene from the old days. Every generation has a different mentality, but Marwa for herself hopes that the traditions come back to be what they once were. Before the intifāḍa, or even during the intifāḍa, until the 90s, there was a stronger connection between people, and that is why Marwa thinks this was the best time for the city. She says "*kānat kull in-nās ʿīd wāḥde*". There was social cohesion that is gone today.

She thinks this is maybe due to social media. Instead of visiting, people write messages. The family gathers only on Fridays and not during the week. Nobody asks about the neighbours or visits them. When there was no internet, people had a lot of free time and in their free time, they interacted with each other. Now, everybody in their free time opens the internet and browses, each one according to their preferences. "*kull iṣi zamān kān aḥla, ḥasab ma aḥli kānu yiʿūlūli*", "in the old days, everything was better, according to what my family told me".

The worst time is now, because there is less *tarābuṭ iḡtimāʿi*, "social cohesion", and people do not care about traditions or carry them on like they once did. But in the last year or so, there has been renewed interest in traditions like the *istiqbāl*. There is a trend to make displays of old traditions and take photos of them, especially by Palestinians in the diaspora, that is what Marwa noticed.

3.2. ʿAbīr

ʿAbīr is 21 years old, she studies television and radio at the an-Nağāḥ University in Nablus, and is currently doing an internship with the local radio. She also works as a news presenter.

⁴An appearance of this percussion group can be found here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvzhXWhXGXI>

3. Narrating Nablus

She grew up in Nablus and says about her city *kbirt fiha w traḡrāḡt fiha*, “I grew up there and was raised there”. The area she grew up in is called Šārīḡil-Madāris, because it is full of schools. She and her family still live there. ḡAbīr explains to me that in Nāblus, they do not refer to *ḡārāt*, “quarters” or “districts”, but to “streets”⁵. She describes the area as quiet and *latīfe*, “nice”. It is also very central, and she can reach the old city, the western area of the city, her school and now university easily.

The most Nabulsi place, or a place that represents Nablus for ḡAbīr is without question the old city. It has all the very old shops, and there is a famous sight, the clock tower which she connects to the face of the city very strongly. ḡAbīr says, *il-balad il-ḡadīme ka-kull hiyye bitḡabbir ḡan Nāblus*, “the old city as a whole expresses Nablus”.

When asked about a thing or object that is typical for Nablus, she immediately says “Nabulsi soap”. She explains that this is because it has been a speciality of Nablus for a long time. The second thing is *knāfe*, which is also very typical, and linked to the old city. There are also, and that is maybe the most Nabulsi thing she can think of, the old ways and quarters of the old city, that are really unique.

What springs to her mind when she thinks of soap is its shape and its smell. ḡAbīr tells me what makes Nabulsi soap special is that it contains only natural ingredients, and its way of production. There are no chemicals involved. Other than that, it has many advantages, it is good for the skin and hair and it does not cause allergies. Moreover, it is a local product, made “by Palestinian hands”. She says this is what distinguishes it from other kinds of soap.

She cannot tell me exactly how soap is produced today, but she knows it is made from olive oil, and that there is a special process to make it. She has not delved deeply into it, but she has seen that they use olive oil and they sometimes make it into different forms (*qawālib*, “casting moulds”). Even though she cannot think of any brand names off the top of her head, she remembers how they were wrapped and thinks they are probably named after the family who produces them.

When talking about it, another thing she thinks of is that the soap production is declining and is almost gone. There were many factories which used to make soap, but they fell into disrepair or stopped operating. Some were restored and used for other projects, as cafes for example. The production is disappearing, it is still there, but it is disappearing.

In old times, the soap factories were in the old city. In each quarter, there were more than five or six soap factories. She now can think of only two. Neither of them produce soap anymore. One of them is next to the Brēk spice mill⁶. The other one was destroyed and when she was last there, they had renovated it and turned it into another project. Most of the buildings in the old city are like that, they are either destroyed completely or there are other projects that take over the space. There are also soap factories still operating today, and ḡAbīr remembers one of them in the city centre, next to the *duwwār*.

The main reason for this decline, according to ḡAbīr, is that foreign soap is coming to the country, and people prefer to use that instead of the Nabulsi soap. This is even though

⁵This applies to the new city. The old city has *ḡārāt*, sing. *ḡāra*.

⁶A popular tourist destination in the old city of Nablus.

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the soap has many advantages. It is good for the body, the hair, the skin... According to ʿAbīr, *in-nās šārat titmāl li-l-muntağ il-ʿağnabi aktar min il-maḥalli*, “people lean towards the foreign product more than the local”.

ʿAbīr believes only the older generations still use this kind of soap, because they are used to it. She expresses it this way: *akīd il-ağlab iʿtimādo li-l-muntağāt il-ağnabiyye aktar, la-innha mumken b-naẓarhum mawtūqa aktar aw šī, bass ḥakēt lek aktar n-nās illi bistaʿmlu š-šābūn in-Nābulsi humme li-kbār illi tʿawwadu ʿalē asāsan*, “certainly most rely on the foreign product more, because maybe in their view it is more trustworthy or something, but I told you, those who use Nabulsi soap most are the old ones who got used to it”. She herself in honesty does not use it.

Nabulsi soap was connected to architecture and therefore stands out in history. The soap factories in the old city today are considered touristic sights. They were owned by well-known Nabulsi families. When tourists come to Nablus, she shows them Nabulsi soap first, because this is what Nablus is famous for. She also shows them the factories where it was produced, because the structure of the factory was very special and is also proof for the innovative spirit of the person who built it.

The citizens of Nābulus are all close to each other. ʿAbīr expresses this as *kullhum ʿarībīn min baʿd, w kullhum biʿribu la-baʿd*, “they are all close to each other and they all get close to each other”, and they always support each other. When there is a problem, for example when the intifāda happened, it was very well-known that Nabulsis helped each other. At the time of the curfew, there was no one – so they said - who had to sleep hungry, “it was impossible”, according to ʿAbīr. *il-kull bisāʿid baʿd, fa-hāda illi bimayyiz sukkān Nāblis b-šakl ʿām*, “everybody helps each other, and that is what make Nablus special in a general sense”.

There are Nabulsi families that have been well-known for a long time, for example Ṭūqān, Nimr, and others. Their soap factories are still there, like the Ṭūqān and Nābulsi and Ḥāğğ Nimr factory. Regarding their social status, those families still hold great prestige in Nablus. Nablus grew and now there are other families, but the original Nabulsi families are still known, to the extent that there are families who say, “it is impossible that I should marry someone from outside Nablus”. *hāda l-iʿtiqād ʿinna ktīr zāʿid fi Nāblis*, “this belief is very prominent in Nablus”. It is getting less and less nowadays, but it was there for a very long time. The purpose of it is so the family name would be carried on.

Even though there is a strong cohesion in Nablus, when asked about it directly, ʿAbīr says there is a kind of “racism” or discrimination. When I tell her I have heard that Nabulsis are very aware of who is a Nabulsi and who came from outside Nablus, she replies with great emphasis: *bi-z-zabt - hiyye hēk*, “exactly – it is like that”. There are people who are known as Nabulsis, and there are people who are known to have come from a village or from other cities. This has caused a kind of racism between the inhabitants of the city. There are also a lot of problems between, for example, the peasant and the city dweller, or the one who is from Nablus and the one who is from outside Nablus, ʿAbīr says. The good thing about this is that at this time, it is becoming much less.

When I ask if ʿAbīr considers Nabulsi soap to be heritage, she tells me that soap is definitely part of the heritage of Nablus, because Nablus was the only city that was characterised by the production of soap. Soap is also part of Palestinian heritage, and

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this is because Palestine is the only country where Nabulsi soap is produced. Hence, it of course belongs to Nablus and it of course belongs to Palestine. Nablus is a city in Palestine, and everything that comes from Nablus comes from Palestine. Palestine contains Nablus, it is the greater entity and Nablus is the small entity.

When I ask her if she thinks there is a contradiction in things being both part of Nabulsi and Palestinian heritage, she replies that no, not in her opinion, because it is all one. The idea is, ʕAbīr explains patiently, that the Nabulsi heritage belongs to the Palestinian heritage or is “attached to it”, *tābiʕ li-t-turāt il-filastīni*. The Nabulsi identity itself is an original Palestinian identity. But the difference is that every city is characterised by something it presents or produces or puts forward (*ʔaddamato*). Every city in Palestine has its characteristics, for example in the dress. Every city had its own style of embroidery, *fi t-tōb⁷ il-filastīni l-qadīm, masalan Nāblis kān ilha taṭrīz xāṣṣ, Bēt Lāḥm kān ilha taṭrīz xāṣṣ, kull madīne kān ilha taṭrīz xāṣṣ*, “regarding the old Palestinian dress, for example Nablus had its own embroidery, Bethlehem had its own embroidery, every city had its own embroidery”. Every city produces its own heritage, but it all comes together as Palestinian heritage, and “it is our duty to preserve it”, says ʕAbīr.

She tells me that recently, she started to come to the old city more and get to know it more. In Nablus, not only the soap as heritage is disappearing, but also the paths through the city. People from outside of Palestine knew the old city in Nablus, because it was originally famous for its *ḥārāt*. There are stories behind the names of each *ḥāra*. ʕAbīr tells me not to forget the “castles” that are in the old city, big houses that belonged to famous families of Nablus. Qasr Ṭūqān for example is being renovated. It will become a touristic spot, she thinks, where you can visit and see the old building with the renovations they made. She thinks there is a program to renovate all the old castles, because they are part of Nabulsi heritage. The families who owned the castles are still in Nablus, but they left the castles. There are people other than the original owners who live in them, but some of them do not care about heritage or do not have the capacity to care about the heritage.

The best time for Nablus as a city was the 40s, or if she wants to be more precise, from the 40s until the 1990s, says ʕAbīr. Whenever she listens to the older generations, they always say that after the intifāda, Nablus ceased to be like before, and she imagines this is true. It was once considered the economic heart of Palestine, but after the intifāda all governmental structures and economic enterprises moved to Ramallah. So Ramallah became the economic capital of Palestine. Nablus was hit hard by the intifāda, ʕAbīr tells me.

According to her, ʕAbīr might be living through Nablus’ worst time in history. Now, with Corona, everything is closed and the economy is suffering. This is the case in all of Palestine. But at the same time, ʕAbīr is very very optimistic regarding the future. There are many projects that are starting and many things are becoming better and developing. In ten years, the situation will be much better, says ʕAbīr. Nablus will be in a very good situation then.

⁷tōb < tōb < tawb.

3.3. Badra

Badra is 31 years old. She studied architecture at an-Nağāḥ university and now works in interior design. Her work is online with companies outside of the country. Although she was born in Jerusalem, she lived her whole life in Nablus. Her father was a doctor at a hospital in Jerusalem, but she came to Nablus right after her birth.

They lived in the house of her grandfather and grandmother, in an area that is called Šārīḥ li-Šwētre, next to Darağ il-Karmil and the public library. Badra lived her childhood in this area. Then, they moved to il-Maxfiyye. In 2000, they came to the house where they live now, on the northern mountain⁸. Of those three neighbourhoods, Badra definitely loved li-Šwētre the most. She tells me this is because it is a neighbourhood or street that is different from all other neighbourhoods in Nablus. From an urban design perspective, which is related to what Badra studied, li-Šwētre lies between Rafīdyā and the old city. Rafīdyā is noisy, with a lot of traffic, and it has a lot of shops, and the old city is the same, a lot of noise and a lot of traffic. Li-Šwētre is a spot of calm between the two. It is one of the most beautiful streets in Nablus. Moreover, there are no new buildings like in the rest of Nablus. When you look at Nablus from above, you see that it is all buildings, says Badra. But li-Šwētre has not changed in about 30 years, all of the houses are old. They were not destroyed and there were no new houses built instead of them. There is also a river, and there are agricultural areas. Living there was special, because they did not live in a big building like they do now, that has seven floors, and where a lot of people from different environments live together. There are for example people from outside of Nablus living in their new building now, but in li-Šwētre, the neighbours had known each other for thirty years, and they lived their whole life together, and they were all from similar backgrounds. In short, those people, their neighbours, were a lot like them. Life was beautiful and simple.

A place that Badra finds very Nabulsi is the old city, all of it. Another place Badra remembers, and where she goes when she needs to take a breath, or calm down, is the Darağ al-Karmil and the public library. The library is a special place for Nablus. This is because *Ḥaṣarat Ḥuṣūr iktīr, marrat Ḥalēha Nāblis*, "it has lived through decades that have gone by in Nablus". It has been there from the days of the Ottomans. For a while, it was a hotel, and then it became a public library. Her father spent his childhood in this library, he went there to read, as she did after him. Badra feels that it represents Nablus. All of Nablus' children over the decades shared the same library. A thing that is very Nabulsi for Badra is definitely Nabulsi soap, and *knāfe - knāfe* even comes before soap.

When I ask her what she thinks of when I say "Nabulsi soap", Badra says she thinks of the soap factories that she has visited. She studied architecture, and went to the old city to analyse the soap factories and the different houses. She remembers how the space in the soap factories was partitioned in a special way. When she smells Nabulsi soap, she remembers her grandfather, because he uses it a lot. The soap is special because

⁸Which is Ḥaybāl.

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it is organic, and it is good for the skin, but if Badra is honest, her skin gets a little dry when she uses it. This is why she only uses it occasionally. Now, there are new developments of Nabulsi soap, for example liquid Nabulsi soap or soap with rose scent, instead of the big cube-shaped soap. Badra uses those regularly. The generation that uses Nabulsi soap most is the older generation. For example, her mother's grandmother was known to be very beautiful. Her hair was blond, and very long and thick. As a kid, she was always asking her grandmother how her great-grandmother's hair came to be so beautiful, and her grandmother said this was because she used to bathe using Nabulsi soap. Badra confides that in her opinion, this has more to do with good genes than with a specific kind of soap, and laughs. Badra wants to tell me something else that just came to her mind: She has a friend who is Egyptian but lives in America. He loves Nabulsi soap so much that he even orders it from Amazon, despite it being very expensive. When you buy the soap in Nablus, it is very cheap. She can tell me that the soap factories were important for the structure of the old city, and they were something that was specific to Nablus. Soap making distinguished Nablus from other cities. The topic of soap is related to the *ḥammāmāt*, the public baths of which Nablus has many. The two are interrelated, *le-tnēn bikammalu baʿīḍ*, "they complement each other". Soap production exists only in Nablus, Aleppo in Syria and Sayda in Lebanon, Badra has never seen it in any other place. The soap is good for this city, Badra thinks. In neighbouring countries, this type of soap made from olive oil is known as "Nabulsi", for example in Egypt. Badra has visited some soap factories, like the ʿArafāt factory. This has been turned into a cultural building of some sort, where workshops about soap making are given. Badra and the other participants were shown the oven, and the vessel for mixing and such. Badra does not remember exact details, but she has seen how soap is made a few times. After the mixing, they put it on the floor and then they cut the soap. Badra once designed a piece of furniture that had Nabulsi soap and Palestinian embroidery as a theme.⁹

The beautiful thing about Nablus is that it has an old city with clear sights or landmarks, and its borders are very clear. It is surrounded by a wall that has several entrances, to the west, the east, etc. Even though this part of the city is old, it is still full of life. There is economic activity, and there are people living in it. The people of the city rely on it and go there to buy things. They tried many times to destroy the old city, but it is still alive. Badra says, *biftaxir fī, fī hayy il-balad*, "I am proud of this city". There are several people who work towards the revitalisation of the old city, like ʿAbdullah, with whom both Badra and I are acquainted.¹⁰ Badra also loves Nablus from an architectural point of view, its buildings are beautiful, the stones with which they are built are beautiful, and it has beautiful colours. Geographically, it has a good location for a city. It is a pity that nowadays, it is full of new buildings, but *il-mafrūd innha ḥilwe*, "it is supposed to be beautiful", says Badra and laughs again.

⁹Which can be viewed here: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/75820737/Furniture-unit-inspired-by-Palestinian-embroidery>.

¹⁰In fact, ʿAbdullah connected me to most of the interviewees and also gave me an interview, which can be read below.

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When I mention to Badra that in my experience, the people of Nablus are very kind, she immediately agrees. She hesitates and has to think a little about her answer to the question what makes the people of Nablus special, "*la-ʔinno sukkān Nāblis miš ktīr maḥbūbīn bi-l-muḥāfazāt*", "because the people of Nablus are not very well liked in the provinces". Badra feels the people of Nablus are a little closed-off among themselves, *munḡaliqīn ʕa-ḥālhum*, unlike Ramallah, which is very open, and its inhabitants are open. But not Nablus, in Nablus people know each other very well. They know who is from this family or from that family, and you feel that they judge people according to that. At the same time, the university made it more open, because it made Nablus welcome a lot of people who came and lived there, and they worked there. The Nabulsi's speciality is commerce and trade. I tell Badra that in other conversations, the topic of gossip came up. She laughs and tells me that is true. Nablus is a small city, she says, and the families know each other very well. That is why there are a lot of people who gossip about each other, but she says about herself, that she is - thank god – somehow *maʕzūle*, "isolated" and safe from gossip.

The soap making families she knows about are for example Šakʕa and ʕArafāt. The factories Badra can think of off the top of her head are Šakʕa, whose factory is next to the western cemetery, and the ʕArafāt soap factory which is next to the Brēk coffee mill in the old city, and there is the Ṭūqān factory or factories, one is at the *duwwār* and one, Badra is not sure if it belongs to the Ṭūqān or not, in the old city. There is also ir-Rantīsi in *ḥarat il-Ġarb*¹¹. Those are the ones she remembers. The great families of Nablus are, of course, well-known. Most great families were feudal families, and they had something they call "castles" in Nablus. For example the Ṭūqān, Šaxšīr, Hāšim, but there are also other families that were not feudal, but big in size, like the al-Xalīli family, which is the family of Badra's mother. Who else? There is also the *dār* of Mašri, who are known because there is someone very rich, Munīb al-Mašri¹², and there is the al-Xayyāṭ family that is regarded as a great family. There are a lot, Badra tells me. But her own family is very small. They have been in Nablus for a long time, her grandfather's father was born in Nablus, but he lived in Bīsān,¹³ which is a city near the *ġor*¹⁴. It lies between Tiberias and Nablus. Badra's grandfather lived in Bīsān, but during the *nakba*¹⁵, he returned to Nablus with his family and lived in the house that was already there. So, her family is one of the original Nabulsi families, but the problem is, they do not have many sons, they have daughters¹⁶. That is why there are so few of them. Most of them left the country and now live in Kuwait and Jordan. Only her grandfather remained. She only has her father and one paternal uncle, who lives in Ramallah in Palestine, so her father is the only one who is still in Nablus.

¹¹Also a location in the old city.

¹²Believed to be the richest Palestinian in Palestine.

¹³Hebrew: Bet She'an.

¹⁴The fertile agricultural area of the Jordan valley.

¹⁵The Palestinian exodus in 1948, see the chapter below.

¹⁶Only the sons carry on the family name. This is why Badra only refers to her male relatives when talking about her family. Although a woman's family is also important, when talking about family, by default the paternal line of the family is meant.

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Nabulsi soap is certainly heritage for her, and certainly considered Nabulsi heritage. Nablus is a part of Palestine. It is different from other cities, be it its dialect, or the customs and traditions. It resembles Damascus a little. But on the other hand, it is a part of Palestine, and one cannot say it is a part of Syria. Palestinian heritage is rich and varied according to Badra, for example there is peasant heritage, there is the heritage of the people of the coast, there is Bedouin heritage, there is the heritage of the big cities like Hebron, Nablus, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. So, it is varied, and Nabulsi heritage is part of it, just like that, she shrugs. Many people notice, according to Badra, that the Nabulsi dialect is not very similar to the Palestinian dialect. For example, the way Badra speaks is more similar to Damascus Arabic than to the dialect of a village or city next to Nablus. Badra understands people in Syrian television series better than she understands someone from Ramallah, or from Balāṭa. Moreover, Nabulsi food is very similar to Syrian food. Badra is not sure about the reason, but suggests it might be due to commercial contacts, because in old times, there was a lot of trade between the two cities.

Regarding the Palestinian dress, Badra's account is very interesting to me. She says the dress is the most famous thing about Palestinian heritage. When Badra wears this kind of dress, she knows that it expresses Palestinian identity, but her grandmother did not wear a dress like that, and neither did her grandmother's grandmother, or her grandmother. Anyone from a village next to Nablus, their grandmother to this day wears a dress like that, but Badra's grandmother did not. Her grandmother wore clothes from the store, which was normal. When Badra wears it, she is aware that it is a peasant dress, not a Palestinian dress. She feels like she is wearing something that can be considered *istišrāq dātī*, "self-orientalisation". She feels like she is taking something that is somebody else's heritage, but in reality, her relatives never wore that dress nor were they very interested in it. It became a trend, and that is why she started to like it. Her grandmother used to stitch and embroider and wear her embroidery, but she did not do that because she was used to doing so, she also wore it because it became a trend. Badra herself really likes Palestinian embroidery. She would like to do designs that use the patterns of embroidery. This way, she feels she is connecting with Palestinian heritage through her work.

Badra was born in 1989, and of the times she has lived, the best was until 2000, the first ten years of her life. That was before the second intifāḍa. The first intifāḍa, which lasted until 1994 or 1995 happened during those years, but Badra was still very little. She remembers that there were problems, for example she remembers car tyres burning, but there are also good memories. The best time for Nablus as a city, she thinks were the 1980s or the 1970s. They say the municipality in this time was very orderly and very clean. The mayor was from the Šakʿa family. Nablus was one of the most beautiful cities, with a lot of water wells. It was certainly more beautiful than it is now, says Badra. Now, unfortunately, there are many buildings, they are Nablus' misery. As an example of the prosperity of Nablus, Badra tells me about an old villa on the northern mountain, built in the 1960s by an architect from the ʿArafāt family. Imagine, says Badra, the same villa was copied and built in Amman, because Nablus was considered more urbanised

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than Amman. When Badra hears this, it makes her angry and sad to look at the state of Nablus now. It was among the first cities that had a sewage system. Amman until the 1990s had cesspools and they did not have running water. It makes one sad to think Nablus was among the most developed cities, Yāfa, Beirut, Nablus were some of the best developed in the Levant, Badra tells me. "*traḡaḡna ktīr*", "we suffered a great regression". There is no mall in Nablus, there are no brands. The streets are not pedestrian friendly at all. When Badra walks on the street, she does not find a proper sidewalk to walk on. The streets in Nablus are *miš ṣadīqa li-l-insān*, "not people-friendly". Badra finds Amman a little better than Nablus regarding this¹⁷. When her grandfather went to Amman for the first time in the 1950s, they asked him which is prettier, Nablus or Amman. He told them, they are both about the same size, but Nablus is more urban. That was in the 50s, can you imagine?, asks Badra. "You see how far we went backward".

The worst time Badra has lived was the invasion, Badra calls it the second invasion, linking it to the occupation that happened in 1967. She says she means "black April" in 2002. 2002 was the worst year, and 2003 was bad as well. All the invasions, and the second intifāda as a whole were bad, from 2000 to 2004 approximately, but 2002 was the absolute worst. They could not go to school, she tells me, and when they could go, there were tanks on the way. It was a very bad time. They¹⁸ took over the family home and sat there, there was a lot of fear. Badra was 12 years old at the time. Once, she was with her younger siblings, they were coming back from school and could not find anyone to take them home, just a bus. They took it for half the way, then they encountered tanks, and they did not know what to do, they fled and hid in the house of her aunt. It was hard, because her sisters were very little, just children, and Badra, herself only a girl, was responsible for them. But, *il-ḥamdu li-llāh*, "thank god", says Badra and means, thank god they are still alive.

3.4. ʕAbdullah

ʕAbdullah was born in Nablus in 1980, where he grew up and went to school. He studied at an-Naḡāḥ University for two years, but he was not very good at his studies. That is why he left. He continued studying at Birzeit University, where he was very happy. He was active at university, active politically with Ḥamās and he was also teaching Tae Kwon Do. He worked in sales with relatives of his. ʕAbdullah tells me that he was in love with a woman, and his life was good. Then he had to go to prison for about 5 years. ʕAbdullah says, this also proved to be a good period for his personal development. He got to know himself better and what he wanted. He thought about his life and decided he wanted to work in academia. The idea for the research project he did when he got out of prison also came to his mind when talking to his fellow inmates there. When he was released at the end of 2007, he finished his Bachelor's degree of Architecture at Birzeit

¹⁷Knowing Amman, this really is not a compliment for Nablus.

¹⁸Badra never referred to the Israeli soldiers in a direct way.

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University and worked in planning for Rawābi, a newly established planned city.¹⁹ After two months, he left the project and worked as a teaching assistant at the university. He then did his MA in Oxford in Architectural Regeneration and Development. He did his doctorate in Leuven, Belgium, where he met his wife.

Growing up, ʿAbdullah and his family lived in a neighbourhood where they had a very good relationship with their neighbours. ʿAbdullah even recalls that when his neighbour gave her grandson money, he did not understand why she did not give him money, and it took him some time to understand that she was not his grandmother but just a neighbour. He did not even knock before he entered the neighbour's house.

When he was twelve, they moved to a neighbourhood where the space between houses was bigger. It took the family a long time to build relationships of trust with the neighbours. He adds that this was maybe also because at the time he was becoming a teenager, and there was more competition between the guys. They were divided into two groups: The boys of the *ḥāra*, "quarter", and the boys who went to the mosque. ʿAbdullah belonged to the latter. He became pious and increasingly felt that he did not belong with the others. He did not always have time to play and he also did not like to behave like they did, swearing and insulting the other guys' mothers and sisters and all that, and they used to tease him and say he had become a *ḥamasāwi*, "member or sympathiser of Ḥamās", and would certainly consider them *kuffār*, "infidels". ʿAbdullah felt he had more in common with the guys from the mosque.

The connections he had at the mosque and most of all to the Tae Kwon Do club made up for the lack of connectedness in the neighbourhood. As a young man, ʿAbdullah was in the Palestinian senior team of Tae Kwon Do, despite being only 17 years old. They travelled to Egypt and Jordan, and he was supposed to travel to Indonesia also, but could not go because by then he had entered university. At the sports club, his self-esteem was high, because he was good at Tae Kwon Do, whereas in the rest of his life he was not very sociable and he was very shy and had problems establishing relationships with people.

When he thinks back to his time in the second neighbourhood area, he says he remembers it as if he was watching an old black-and-white movie. From the first neighbourhood, however, he feels like he remembers everything, even the accent his neighbour had and what she used to cook. He says as an architect, he might be influenced by his research topics, but he thinks this has to do with the way the neighbourhood was structured architecturally. His connection to this neighbourhood is still strong, and he is very attached to it. The same is true for his attachment to the Tae Kwon Do club, which is still very important to him.

After he turned 18, however, the mosque became less important as a point of social attachment. Politically, going to the mosque could be seen as an indication that you are a member of Ḥamās, which is why he did not go there as much anymore. Anyway, his attachment to the mosque was not the strong social attachment others had in his case, ʿAbdullah says. Usually, the social attachment to the mosque is very very strong, he tells me,

¹⁹For an article on Rawābi and the contentious nature of this project, see <https://www.ibtimes.com/self-contained-city-inside-conflict-zone-millionaire-american-palestinian-investor-plans-high-end>.

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but his social attachment was more with the old neighbourhood, the club and some friends.

Prison changed his social attitude. He became very active, and he also overcame his social difficulties, especially the shyness. After he came out of prison, he did not live in any area for a long time, just two years in one neighbourhood in Ramallah, then two in another. There was a split between Ḥamās and Fataḥ, and ʿAbdullah limited his connections in Ramallah to maybe two or three people. He did not deal with many people, except at the mosque, but even that was not a lot. Then, he went to Oxford. He feels that all of this was only a temporal matter.

From 2000 on he did not live in Nablus, and in this time, he lost a lot of connections in the city. Nowadays, he lives there again, runs a hostel and a café and works towards the revitalisation of the old city.

For ʿAbdullah, the most Nabulsi place in Nablus are the mosques and the *sūq*. The mosque is not just a place for prayer. You can go to the mosques, especially in the old city, to find out the news, to meet people, study, read the Quran,... ʿAbdullah used to go to *Ġāmiʿal-Bēk* even if he did not want to pray.

The *sūq* feels like a really Nabulsi place to ʿAbdullah. The way people look, the way they talk, the words they use, even the harrasment. “*yaʿni, fī ʾiṣi Nābulṣi fīha*”, “there is something Nabulsi in it”, ʿAbdullah tells me. When you go to the old city, you feel that there is identity, and when he reads about Nablus during the crusader period, he notices, that there is still *naḥs it-taṣarrufāt*, *naḥs il-ḥarakāt*, “the same behaviour, the same gestures”.

The things he considers most Nabulsi are *knāfe* and soap. When ʿAbdullah is in Belgium, when he is in Italy, when he used to live in Ramallah, he could not live without Nabulsi soap. *Knāfe* is not so easy to transport, but he always brings other sweets from Nablus when he travels.

What first comes to ʿAbdullah’s mind when he thinks about soap is the place where he began to write his thesis about the resistance in Nablus. It was an old soap factory, that now sells coffee and spices, called the Brēk mill, in the middle of the old city. He had reached a dead end in his fieldwork and was quite desperate. This was despite him being from Nablus and despite him being active in the resistance, and his maternal uncle having even died in the resistance. He wanted to ask people about the intifāḍa and how they dealt with the situation and how they resisted. Of course, this was secret, and it was a dangerous topic. People did not want to tell him anything.

Because he was always bringing tourists to the coffee and spice mill, he said to the people there, “I always bring you [tourists], now you have to give me [something in return]”. He explained to them what his thesis was about, and they said, “here is Abu Muḥammad, he knows everything”. That really opened every door in the old city for ʿAbdullah.

Until this day, the people at the Brēk mill still help him with the hostel project and the café, and ʿAbdullah still sends tourists there.

Nabulsi soap has practical advantages for ʿAbdullah. It is good for the skin and hair

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whereas “chemicals” are generally regarded as harmful. ʕAbdullah also mentions that families used to make soap at home, including his own family, and that this is why he and other family members can distinguish between good and bad quality of soap. The feeling Nabulsi soap gives him he describes as *rāḥa nafsīyye*, “emotional comfort”.

He says that there was considerable influence by marketing and media to buy scented soaps and shampoos when capitalism became more and more dominant in Palestine, but since he could not afford those as a teenager and then was already *mutʕawwad ʕalē*, “used to [Nabulsi soap]”, he kept using it.

ʕAbdullah says he uses this kind of soap on his skin and hair, while it is fixed in his mind that other bar-shaped soap is just for washing your hands.

He also admits that he, as a guy, does not care very much about skincare products. He says he does not know about his younger sister, because he left the house when she was four, and that he could imagine she cares more about that kind of stuff.

ʕAbdullah thinks that people today probably do not know as much about soap as he does, and anyway, they prefer perfume to feel clean whereas when he was young, it was understood that you had to wash in order to smell clean. Nabulsi soap itself for ʕAbdullah smells of “the thing that cleans”.

ʕAbdullah has read quite a bit about soap making in ancient times. He tells me the crusaders noticed there was a *šē ʕaḡīb*, “wondrous thing” in Nablus that, when mixed with water, cleans your body. He says soap was produced from the 12th century on, or from the crusader period on. He knows two soap factories, one is at the *duwwār*²⁰ and the other is in the *balad*. Both produce soap in the traditional way. The brands ʕAbdullah knows are al-Ġamal and al-Muṭṭaḥayn.

He tells me that in the 18th or 19th century there were about 46 or 47 soap factories, but approximately 25 of them were in homes and did not produce in commercial quantities. The decline of soap production, according to ʕAbdullah, happened in the 1930s and 1940s.

ʕAbdullah can give a fairly detailed report of how soap is produced, and he also knows about some special vocabulary such as *ḡift* and *qaly*²¹.

ʕAbdullah also says that there used to be a problem with fake brands calling their soap “Nabulsi” soap. He also recalls that in an archive, he found a document where Ḥāḡḡ Nimr an-Nābulṣī complained to the court about such a case of fraud. To this day, there are brands that use the epithet “Nābulṣī” in Egypt.

As an architect, ʕAbdullah can tell a lot about the factory building. It always has two floors, and the upper floor always has a big open space, and this is unique architecturally in Nablus, where only the mosque and the soap factory have this big open space. He regrets that they could not buy the soap factory under their hostel and turn it into a project that both preserves and re-uses the space. Businesspeople bought it and want to turn it into a *ḥammām*. ʕAbdullah says this is capitalism. For it to be a bath, you would

²⁰A *duwwār* is a roundabout. The *duwwār* interviewees are referring to is a landmark in Nablus, right where the new city meets the old city.

²¹Elsewhere *qily* or *qilw*. *Ḡift* is a leftover product of olive oil production used for heating and *qilw* is alkaline powder, traditionally from barilla plant ash.

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have to change the building completely.

He is naturally interested in the relations between people and places. The soap factory buildings, according to him, often served different purposes because of their spaciousness. During the British mandate, they were used as places for political gatherings, and during the second intifāda, goods were stored there and then distributed to the people, especially during the curfew.

Nabulsi soap was exported to Venice and Marseille, according to ʕAbdullah.

As for the differences and connections between Nablus and other Palestinian cities, ʕAbdullah tells me the following: Yāfa and Nāblus had a strong connection. ʕAbdullah's mother herself is from a Yāfāwi family. When she fled to Nāblus in 1948, she already had relatives there that took her in, and she did not have to live in the camps.

The family of the former tenant of the building where ʕAbdullah and his partners established the hostel are Christians originally from il-Lidd. He says most people from there did not come to Nāblus during the *nakba*, but went to Ramallah, and ʕAbdullah suggests this is because of the more Christian character of Ramallah.

Ramallah is much more liberal than Nablus. In Ramallah, his female students talk about when they lost their virginity rather than if they lost their virginity. In Nablus such a girl would likely lose every prospect of getting married. In Hebron, if a girl was seen at a cafe in the company of a boy, she may have to fear for her life.

He also cites the example of homosexuality being punishable by death in Hebron, but only frowned upon in Nablus.

As soap was a source of wealth, it allowed for Nablus' much-famed rebelliousness. ʕAbdullah tells me a story of the Ottomans drafting soldiers for the military. Whoever did not comply had to pay a hefty fine. The Nabulsi, however, could afford to pay the fine and were not drafted for military service. The wealth accumulated due to soap production is not viewed as entirely positive by ʕAbdullah. Accumulating wealth allowed a few notable families to engage in their own private conflicts, so rather than being drafted for the Ottoman military, people were part of local conflicts.

According to ʕAbdullah, the social networks in Nablus are special. The people of the city are always there when you need them, and there is a strong social cohesion between them. For him, this is also related to the space they live in, and he noted that the connection is stronger in the old city and a bit lighter in other parts of the city, but that essentially, people practice the same patterns of solidarity. Everybody knows each other, everybody talks about everybody, but when you are in need, people will be there for you. Literally he says: "You will find them." Of course people interfere in your life, but they are also there for you when you need them.

On this, ʕAbdullah tells an anecdote: When he came out of prison, his mother wanted him to get married so he would not go to prison again. When he accompanied a friend to university and sat down for a while to chat with a female friend he had met there by chance, his mother already had the news when he arrived back home and questioned him about the potential marriage candidate.

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Gossip is so strong in Nablus, ʕAbdullah is concerned about safety issues for his hostel at times, because in a few instances, word was people wanted to burn it down because of rumors of improper behaviour surrounding it. ʕAbdullah and his wife are very strict about their guests complying with the conservative social structure of the city.

They eventually dealt with the problem by beating the gossipers with their own weapons and hired one of the worst gossipers as their security guard, because that way, he would be responsible for any rumour that spread about the hostel. ʕAbdullah also mentions that blackmailing, for example by threatening to leak pictures of improper behaviour, is a common tactic to recruit spies.

Foreigners, however, are not part of this conservative scheme. According to ʕAbdullah, a foreigner could walk the streets in a bikini and people would say “*hiyye hēk*”, “she is that way”. But with Arab guests, they are much stricter.

Talking about the great families of Nablus, ʕAbdullah tells me that to this day, there are many fancy houses, or “castles” as they are called, in the old city that belong to families that were all engaged in soap production.

The house where ʕAbdullah established his hostel originally belonged to the ʕAšūr family from Yāfa. ʕAbdullah confirms that almost all big families in Nablus produced soap, but he also told the story of the ʕAšūr from Yāfa who were not aware anymore that they were big soap producers. They rented out their soap factory to the Rantīsī family, Christians who came to Nablus from il-Lidd. The factory was working until the first intifāda but then was neglected and fell into disrepair.

Since the soap factories also worked as banks, not all of their money was clean money: ʕAbdullah said some of them committed *ribā*, “usury”, one of the seven deadly sins, when they gave out credits and were repaid with an interest. He attributes the decline that many of those families suffered to this unislamic practice. With the precaution that this of course is not necessarily actually so, he says that some people believe that the *dār Nābulṣī*, the extended an-Nābulṣi family, or at least some members of it being poor today is a direct result of practicing *ribā*.

Even though or maybe because the social fabric of Nablus is tightly woven, sometimes it is not an easy city in which to establish oneself. ʕAbdullah considers himself Nabulsi, but he thinks the Nabulsis do not consider him a Nabulsi. He says this feeling is strong in Nablus, and people would see him and his wife as Nabulsis only when they do something good, and do not see him as a Nabulsi when he does something bad. His father was not born in Nablus, but came to the city when he was 16 years old, and his mother is from a family that is half Nabulsi and half Yāfāwi. “*bi-Nāblis ktīr biṭallaḥu la hāda š-šī*”, “in Nablus, they look at this very much”.

But on the other hand, ʕAbdullah says, if you looked at statistics, 70% of the people would turn out not to originally be from Nablus. ʕAbdullah thinks that the British mandate changed the relationship between city and village a lot, as well as the relationship between different cities. Before, Nabulsi families usually also had a house in a different city as well. His paternal family is originally from Nablus, before they came to Ṭulkarm, so they are *min ʕāṭilāt Nāblis il-ʔaṣīle*, *aw ʕala l-aqall min ʕāṭilāt Nāblis il-ʕarabiyye l-aṣīle*, “among the original families of Nablus, or at least among the original Arab

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families of Nablus”, because there are families in Nablus that are not of Arab origin. His mother’s mother did not look Arab at all. She had blond hair, a round face and blue eyes. ʕAbdullah even says: “*mustahīl tkūn ʕarabiyye, iṣ-ṣakl tabaʕha, kull il-ʕēle hadīk, fa-mā naʕrif wēmta iḡu ʕa filastīn*”, “it is impossible that she could be Arab, her appearance, all that family, so we do not know when they came to Palestine”.

In Nablus, there are also Samaritans, and some Orthodox, and Byzantines in former times. They were there before the Arab conquests, and it took some time for the city to become Muslim and for the people to mix with the Arabs that came from the peninsula.

ʕAbdullah and his wife purchased the house above the Rantīsi soap factory, and they also wanted to buy the factory because of the beautiful open space, perfect for cultural activities and right in the middle of the city. One of the Rantīsi brothers had moved to Ramallah, and the other was a drunkard, but it was difficult for the ʕAṣūr to get him out of the factory and the rental contract because they shyed from open conflict with a Christian who would be protected as a minority, says ʕAbdullah. Thus, it was only after the neglected factory had been broken into and it could be proven that the tenant always left a window open that the ʕAṣūr could reclaim the building from the Rantīsi.

He was only recently made aware that soap could be part of a Nabulsi heritage, says ʕAbdullah, although he clearly has thought about the concept before I mention it to him. I ask if he considers his use of Nabulsi soap to be a matter of affection or a matter of practicality. He answers that he now supports the idea that it is a local product with importance to the local economy. Originally, his connection to Nabulsi soap was of a much more practical nature. He did not grow up in a wealthy family, and Nabulsi soap was available, affordable and of a reliable quality.

ʕAbdullah contends that national identities are invented, the Palestinian one as much as any other national identity. In the Ottoman era, there were no Palestinian borders, and people did not know that Beirut and Damascus were not “with us”. Belonging was with a Christian or Muslim identity, as well as an Arab identity and, of course, one’s family.

When I ask if he thinks that soap is part of the Nabulsi heritage, he answers that it certainly is, and that it is part of *it-turāt iṣ-ṣāmi*, “Levantine heritage”, because Nablus was competing with other soap-producing cities in the region over the hegemony on soap production, such as Damascus, Beirut, Nazareth and Aleppo. I ask if he would also regard it as Palestinian heritage, on which he answers that Nabulsi heritage is of course Palestinian heritage, but that Palestinian heritage is not necessarily also Nabulsi heritage – *it-taqāfe in-Nābulsiyye hiyye filastīniyye, bass it-taqāfe il-filastīniyye miṣ ṣart innha Nābulsiyye*. He alludes to restrictive social practices being justified under the guise of “tradition”, and I get the impression that he wants no part of this kind of behaviour and does not want to include such an attitude in his personal definition of local “culture”, even though he is aware that this is part of Palestine.

Another thing he does not agree with in the process of inventing national culture is the embroidered dress, which according to him was just for weddings. He says that his grandmother could never afford to wear such a dress, and he does not understand why anyone would convince him that this dress was “cultural” and the dress his grandmother

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was actually wearing was not part of the culture. He says of course it is part of the culture that there are women who dress like that, but there is no reason for this to be the one and only example of women's dress in Palestine.

The best time for ʿAbdullah was when the Palestinian Authority first came, because the city was highly regarded at that time. There was a decline that started in the years between 2004 and 2008, when the city "collapsed", *il-madīne nhārat*. This collapse was economic, social and cultural. There was a new class of capitalists and corrupted heroes, and people who profited from the losses of the city and the intifāḍas. The Ḥamās-Fataḥ division is a real rift through society according to him, and he is against the dominance of Fataḥ who he says really encouraged the division, and by demonising Ḥamās, they demonised the resistance. ʿAbdullah regards the time we live in now as the worst time, because people do not care so much about the resistance any more and do not trust it, the social values are going down and the social bonds are becoming looser. Sacrifices are not valued anymore, and ethics have become individualist and selfish. Even the time of the second intifāḍa was better in a way, because there was trust in society, and a shared spirit.

The pre-Oslo period was different, because at that time, during the occupation, any Palestinian endeavour was part of the *muqāwame*, schools, universities, businesses. This is not even taking Corona into consideration, which of course makes the situation very difficult.

ʿAbdullah thinks that people feel at a loss about what their national heritage is. Nablus has little in common with Gaza, or Hebron, and it is more like Beirut than like Hebron. ʿAbdullah says that they have not reached the stage of having an authority that determines national identity, and that there are many identities - instead of one or no identity at all. He also thinks that this is one of the few good things about not having a nation state.

3.5. Nādā

Nādā was born and raised in Nablus. She graduated from Birzeit University and did her PhD in Europe, where she still lives and works in academia. Her core areas of research are Palestine and Yemen.

Nādā grew up in Rafīḍya, a neighbourhood that used to be quiet and full of green, with a lot of space and a garden around every house, with old citrus trees, lemon, orange, pomelo and others. Nowadays it has become "all cars and annoyance", Nādā tells me.

Three things, for Nādā, are connected to the land and therefore typical or symbolic for Nablus. One of them is Nabulsi soap, the other two are foods: Zaʿtar, thyme or a mixture of herbs containing mainly thyme, and *ʿakkūb*, an edible thistle (*gundelia*) – which Nādā hates despite never having tasted it, and which is connected to a specific memory.

When I ask her about the first thing that comes to her mind when I say "*ṣābūn Nābulsi*", she simply says: "It cleans well!" and laughs. Her connection to it is purely one of habit and of practicability, she assures me.

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Soap is a *ǧuz? la yataǧazza? minno*, an “indispensible part” of life for Nādā, there needs to be one in the house, and when she comes to Europe where she lives, she always brings one. What Nādā likes about the soap are very pragmatic things: it is a good kind of soap, it cleans well and it gets rid of stains.

The ones to primarily use Nabulsi soap belong to the generation of her grandmother, because they were always washing by hand, she says. In her parent’s house, you would find both types of soap. In her maternal uncle’s house, they are very traditional, and you will not find any soap except for Nabulsi soap. The same goes for her paternal uncle’s house.

She says that she does not really know much about soap production and in which way it was important for Nablus, but she does know that it was important economically, and, *iza biddi aḥallil*, “if I want to analyse”, she thinks that when the economic situation is better, the social situation is better too. She also says that because of the political situation, soap production suffered a decline. According to her, there were about 30 soap factories, of which she knows about four that are still operating. But, to this day, every shop in the old city displays soap as one of the products they sell, “you see it everywhere”. Regarding the production process, she recalls seeing the soap spread out on the floor, and that it was cut. She also remembers seeing a well of olive oil in a factory she visited. She knows of the Ṭūqān, Nābulsi and Kanfān factories, and also says she thinks the factory at the *duwwār* belongs to the Šakʿa family. Nādā told me about new developments regarding soap. Of course, there is still the traditional, original soap, that “would break your leg if it fell on it”, the cube-shaped brick of soap. But nowadays, there is also another kind of soap with new packaging. She shows me a piece of soap from the “Nablus” soap factory. There is also soap with artistic designs, with Ḥaṇḏala²² or Palestine drawn on it, that you can also order according to your wish. People bring those soaps as presents from Palestine, and she thinks tourists are also interested in seeing different forms of soap, and especially artistic designs. For herself, *ka-Nābulsiyye*, “as a Nabulsi”, she prefers the soap-brick. Nādā thinks that through art, even if it is for a commercial purpose like with the soap, an idea reaches people and they start questioning, “where did this come from, what is this design or this drawing?”, and those questions help people understand what is really going on. For her, this is a good method of connecting people with the history of Palestine.

Quite famously, sometimes single batches of ball-shaped soap are made. When I tell Nādā that I have read innovation regarding soap is sometimes refrained from because soap producers fear it might not be regarded as “Nabulsi soap” anymore, her thoughts were that maybe people produce such specific types of soap only when a batch is ordered or after estimating how many tourists who will buy this special soap are going to come to the old city.

Nādā calls soap an *intāǧ waṭani Nābulsi*, a “Nabulsi national product”. Through keeping up an industry, namely soap production, Nāblus resists the Israeli efforts to damage its economy, says Nādā. It shows that there is still history that is kept alive in the form

²²The comic strip figure of a small boy, invented by the artist Naji al-Ali and a widespread symbol for the Palestinian people.

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of soap production. Because settlers regularly attack farmers at the time of the olive harvest, it is extremely difficult to obtain Palestinian olive oil. But precisely because of this, Nādā sees a connection between resistance and olive oil, and since olive oil is the most important ingredient of soap, the connection extends to soap. Nādā recognises resistance not only as an action. She says: *iṣ-ṣumūd nōf min il-iṣtizāz, nōf min il-huwiyye*, it is “a kind of strengthening, a kind of identity.” The terms *ṣumūd*, “steadfastness” and *muqāwame*, “resistance” are all connected according to Nādā, and they are also connected to the olive oil and olive oil soap. Many Palestinians wear a necklace with an olive tree, a symbol for the Palestinian land and for being Palestinian.

Nādā also tells me that during the time of harvest, many foreigners come to Palestine to help with the harvest and to protect the farmers through their presence. When I reply that it is sad that a foreigner’s presence should facilitate a Palestinian’s presence on their own olive grove, she replies *ḥayā il-filastīni raqam*, “the life of the Palestinian is a number”. She says that foreigners have a state that protects them, and therefore they are immune, or at least better protected against such attacks, but since Palestinians lack the protection of a strong state, their lives are worth less. She sarcastically illustrates what happens to many Palestinians by a whistle and a thumbs-down. This applies also to people *illi mā ilhum ṣilāqa bi-s-siyāse*, “who are not connected to politics”.

Nādā says, some mayor, she doesn’t exactly remember when, did not allow peasants to come and settle in the city, so they would stay in the village and keep tilling their land, thus holding on to it. This she considered a form of *sumūd*, as Israel would otherwise take the land.

Regarding rebelliousness, Nādā describes it as follows: *Nāblis fīha muqāwame ḥilwe*, “in Nablus, there is beautiful resistance”. According to her, that is also why Israel closed the city, not only in the immediate invasion and the following siege in 2002, but also after, until 2009. Nādā remembers, when she used to come home from university in Ramallah, she had to go on the mountain and it was dangerous and scary. She says *yā bitṣiṣi yā bitmūti la-tūṣali*, “you either live or die until you arrive”. The military were searching cars and there were soldiers everywhere. Nādā describes the *muqāwame* in Nablus as *ḡāḡa*, and adds, *Nāblus, fīha muqāwame ḥilwe, muqāwame ṣaḡḡa*, thus describing the resistance in Nablus as “real” or “well-organised”, “beautiful” and “right”. She says: This kind of resistance is not connected to the PA (which she simply refers to as *is-sulṭa*, “the power”), but to the families. *in-nās ṣarfīn baṣḡḡa, in-nās mitmāskīn*, “people know each other, and they stand together”. In Nādā’s opinion, the PA only gets money and doesn’t really deal with the concerns of, for example, students or other people, which she expresses as *is-sulṭa mā ilha ṣilāqa bi-ṣ-ṣaṣb*, “the authority does not have a connection to the people”. The PA, says Nādā, does not really control Nablus. She tells me about the popular committess during the intifāḡa, and how the PA was afraid of this popular institution. Those who were part of the network and worked as clerks for the PA were transferred to other cities to break up this strong network that had developed. Especially in the old city, there are many *muqāwimīn*, “people who practice resistance”.

She usually buys Nabulsi soap for practical reasons, but when she brings it to her friends as a gift, it is also to remind them of Palestine, and that there are still beautiful things in Palestine, and that there is a positive side to the resistance. She called it *nōf*

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min il-intimāʔil-ḡamāl, a “positive kind of belonging”²³ She does not know whether I want to call this an emotional connection, as she would not refer to any of those feelings as “emotional” or “affectionate”.

For Nādā, it is her relatives that make Nablus what it is. Without her relatives, Nablus would not be the same for her. When talking about the people of Nablus, Nādā says *waʔt il-ḡādd bitlāʔihum*, “in serious times, you will find them”, they will be there for you when you need them, regardless if they like you or not. She stresses that it makes no difference if they like you as a person, as social beings they will help you if you need help. What is more is that there is trust between people. She tells me that if we supposed her mother went shopping and did not have any money on her, she could tell the shopkeeper: “*bukra bāḡi badfaʔlak*”, “I will come tomorrow and pay you”, and the shopkeeper would just say “okay”, and she would come the next day to pay him. She would say “*ana ʔimm iḡlān*”, “I’m the mother of so-and-so”, and the shopkeeper would say “okay, *imm iḡlān*”, even if he saw her for the first time.

The most remarkable trait of people in Nādā’s opinion is their warmth. She says about her city: *Nāblis, fiha difaʔ, fiha maḡabbe, Nāblus il-ahl*, “in Nablus, there is warmth, there is love, Nablus is its people”. Like in any small place, people gossip, and they gossip a lot, but they are also warm and welcoming. Warmth for Nādā is the most defining personality trait of Nabulsis.

Nādā says *Nāblis kullha wāḡid*. When asked directly about some differences between people that she had mentioned to me earlier in an informal conversation, she stresses that in her opinion, there is a great sense of unity in Nablus. Families still have houses in the old city, even if they moved to the surrounding areas when they bettered their economic situation. She sees this as a demonstration of belonging. Also, people did not move far away from the old city.

Another important point for Nādā is that all religious confessions are a part of Nablus. She specifically mentions the Samaritans who live on mount Gerizim and believe that they are the true Jewish sect. Nādā went to public school, because there were no private schools, and in her class, there were Christian girls, and Muslim, Samaritan and Christian girls all went to the same school. She also says there were girls from the camps, from the villages and from the city, without much difference between them. For Nādā, Nablus consists of those who live around and inside the old city, whom she calls *ahl il-balad* and the Samaritans. This includes Christians and Muslims alike, Nādā says *mā fi taʔsīm*, “there is no division”, and her parent’s neighbours were Christians. She also remembers that there even was a church in the old city, but she doesn’t know if it is still in use. Nādā adds that she forgot to mention the three camps around Nablus, Balāṭa, which is the biggest one, ʔAskar and Bēt ʔēn il-maʔ, which also belong to Nablus.

When I ask if she notices a big difference between city people and villagers, she told me that this distinction was important in the old times. Nabulsis did not intermarry with the people from the village. Nādā says, *Nāblis ʔindhum nār, šū yaʔni nār? innhum šāyfin ḡālhum*, “Nabulsis have fire, what does fire mean? That they are proud (or even arrogant)”. Of course there still is a little bit of “*hādi bint il-madīne, hādi bint il-qariyye*”,

²³lit. “a beautiful kind of belonging”.

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"this one is from the city, this one is from the village", but it is much less nowadays. Many people have spouses that come from the village.

Another anecdote Nādā told me on a different occasion was that she was working in a café. Because she had studied in Ramallah, her accent might have been a little bit different from the townspeople's, or maybe her appearance was not that expected of a Nabulsi girl, but a man who came to the café with his wife asked her where she was from. When she assured him that she was from Nablus proper, his wife shouted *Yiyy, faḍaḥtna 'uddām in-nās!*, "Oh, you've embarrassed us in front of the people!". Obviously, she was embarrassed by misreading a person's appearance regarding their background and mistaking them for an outsider.

For Nādā, the idea of a difference between Nabulsi and Palestinian heritage is strange. She does not see a difference, save for the *ʿādāt w taqālīd*, "customs and traditions" and *ṭarīq il-ḥaki, ṭarīq it-taʿāmul*, "the way of speaking, the way of treating each other". These, for her, are not major differences, and certainly they do not threaten Palestine as an entity. Nādā says, *ʔilli ana, ka-Nādā, Nāblis, Ramalla, kullo filastīn. [...] Nāblis hiyye filastīn, Nāblis hiyye Nāblis. [...] Nāblis hiyye ǧuz? min filastīn*, "for me, as Nādā, Nablus, Ramallah, it is all Palestine. Nablus is Palestine, Nablus is Nablus. Nablus is a part of Palestine".

Even if it is sometimes irritating that people are so close, when comparing Nablus to Ramallah, Nādā emphasises that in Ramallah, there is *ǧurbiyye*, lit. "exile" or "being a stranger". Most people in Ramallah are not really from there, and at the weekend, they all go home to Nablus, Tulkarm or wherever. Although she says she loves Ramallah and lived there for quite some time, this seems to bother her and she enjoys the social cohesion in Nablus. There are good and bad sides to it, but Nādā says, in Nablus *fīha widd, fīha maḥabbe*, "Nablus has friendliness, it has love", and she also thinks that *Nāblis, fīha basāṭa. Nāblis, mā fīha hāda l-ǧina il-ktīr il-fāxir*, "in Nablus, there is humbleness. In Nablus, there is not this excessive [display of] wealth", like in Ramallah. *bi-Nāblis, ṣaḥn ḥummus b-xamse šēkel btiṭʿāmi l-ʿēle*, "in Nablus, with a plate of *ḥummus* for 5 Shekel, you feed a family".

Nādā vividly remembers that Rafīdyā was peaceful and full of trees in her childhood. It was once considered to be an independent village, kind of far from the city, but as Nablus grew as a city, it was incorporated into Nablus proper. However, you can still find the old centre of the village if you know where to look, there are a lot of small streets and corners, and you can still buy vegetables from the *xuḍarǧi*, "vegetable grocer", in this old part of Rafīdyā. Nādā would not call this an emotional connection to the place, as I suggested, but would rather just refer to it as "memories". She says she told me this because I asked, but that she normally does not think about it because it is just the way things are: life goes on and things change. She did say, though, in a somewhat nostalgic manner about the place she grew up in: *kānat ḥilwe. hāda rāḥ*, "it was beautiful. That is gone". The architecture and the buildings are a sad story, because there are a lot of commercial buildings instead of beautiful old houses. In old times, when she was young, there was nothing, there was no television, but they were playing in the *ḥāra*, in the streets, there were big open spaces where they played as children, but today it is all

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buildings. Today, there are no places left where one can sit.

From 1993 and the Oslo accords on, there were fewer trees, many old buildings were destroyed, instead commercial buildings were put up. Nādā feels that there is no care for the history of the place. Today, she describes Rafīdyā as *zammāmiyye*, *sayyārāt*, *šabāb rāyḥa ḡāy*, "noisy, cars, youth coming and going". On the other hand, she is glad that there is life around her parent's house and that they are not alone. She also mentions that by taxi, they can reach the old city in five minutes.

The period from 2002 until 2009, when Israel first invaded Nablus, then imposed strict curfews and even after lifting the curfews kept the city cut off from its surroundings, was the worst time for Nablus. Nādā also laments the aftermath of this, that the economic situation is still very difficult. At that moment, I got the impression that she feels Nablus never recovered from that period, and that there is little hope that it would do so in the near future.

Another memory connected to the time of siege that Nādā shares with me is that of *ḡakkūb*, which she has mentioned earlier as one of the things that are typical for Nablus. She says she does not like it, even though she has never eaten it. Her mother likes it, and so does her aunt, who always brought them some when she cooked it. Since people in Nablus liked *ḡakkūb*, they had it in their freezers in great quantities. When electricity was cut off during the siege, the *ḡakkūb* was about to spoil and rot, so everybody cooked what they had and invited all the neighbours to eat it together. Although this is a beautiful story of people who help each other out in times of crisis, the *ḡakkūb* was not a positive memory. The memory of *ḡakkūb* is a memory of hard times for Nādā. The invasion and siege for Nādā is not the onset of problems. The situation became bad after the PA came. There was corruption on unprecedented levels, she tells me. Nāblus was influenced negatively by this.

Nādā, who is a very optimistic person, cannot understand how people in Europe who have everything, can still be so unhappy. She says, the most important thing for Palestinians is to keep up hope. She is convinced, and also says that many others are convinced, that every bad deed will fall back on the one who commits it - *id-dīnye dawara*, "life is a circle".

3.6. Umm Nādā

Umm Nādā was born in Nablus. She was born there, lived there and has always been in Nablus, she tells me. After secondary school, however, she went to Beirut to study. She stayed there for two years. There were problems²⁴ in Beirut, and therefore she did her exam in Alexandria. Beirut and Alexandria were the same university, the two were together. Umm Nādā remembers vividly that when she did her exam, a rose had pricked her. She removed the thorn and went to do her second year exam. Right after the exam, she returned to Nablus and got married.

Look, she says, there is the old city and there is the mountain(s), when I ask her about the place she grew up in. She asks me if I know that Nablus has two mountains, Ḡirzīm

²⁴Nādā adds in the background that the "problems" were the Lebanese civil war.

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and ʿAybāl. She lives on mount ʿIbal with her family, opposite mount Ġirzīm, where the Samaritans live.

On this mountain, the area where she was born is called Blēbūs. Blēbūs is in the middle of the mountain. This area once all belonged to her grandfather. Her “house” or family (*dār*) is the ʿĀmad family, and her grandfather is Aḥmad il-ʿĀmad. About half the mountain belonged to her grandfather. Nowadays, it has of course been cut into parcels of land and sold, but originally, it was all the ʿĀmad’s property.

When she was born, as her mother told her, there were not many houses. There were only three on the whole mountain, among them her grandfather’s. It was, of course, a very big house, one of the very big old houses. When her grandfather died, they split the house and each son got his share. Now, all of it has been split up and sold, and there is nothing left, she says with a laughter that does not sound bitter.

The most original place in Nablus is the old city, Umm Nādā tells me. The old city begins at the *bāb is-sāḥa*. Nablus developed around the old city. There are two things that are almost symbolic for Nablus according to Umm Nādā: *knāfe* and soap. “If Nablus, then *knāfe*. If Nablus, then Nabulsi soap.”, she says. Another thing Nablus is special for is its cuisine. There are special dishes that can be found only in Nablus, like *zalābiye*²⁵.

Nabulsi soap is special for containing only olive oil. The olive oil is good for the skin. Sometimes her skin was dry, and she put olive oil on her face, says Umm Nādā. After some time, after a year, a hair grew on her cheek. Olive oil makes the hair grow, she tells me, and adds that she went to the beauty salon and got rid of the hair, and today uses something else.

The older generation still uses Nabulsi soap. The younger generations do not trust it, they want something scented. Umm Nādā recalls that the woman who helps her in the house said to her: “Nabulsi soap has no scent, I want to put something in the house that smells good”. But Umm Nādā thinks that Nabulsi soap is much cleaner and cleans better²⁶.

When Umm Nādā sees Nabulsi soap, old memories come to her mind, for example her mother would only bathe using Nabulsi soap. She remembers that her mother did not use shampoo on her hair, only Nabulsi soap. And really, her hair was - “Nādā, do you remember her hair?”, she calls to her daughter. Her hair was really wicked, she says with a familiar smile. Another anecdote is that when she went to see her sister’s son in Canada, where he works as a doctor, he said, do not bring anything but Nabulsi soap.

The best soap in the whole country, according to Umm Nādā, is the cube-shaped soap, there are some who make it round, or in various shapes, and there is also *ṣābūn nāʿim*, “fine soap”, which is a powder. For cleaning the house, she uses this *ṣābūn nāʿim*, and she uses it for the whole house. In the house, for the clothes, any stain, chocolate for example, she puts Nabulsi soap on it, and - nothing, it is all gone. It gives a nice shine, a nice smell and a fine touch.

Those who are used to Nabulsi soap, use it a lot, “for example on stains”. When Umm

²⁵A kind of sweet made of fried dough.

²⁶Note that *nāʿif* < *nazīf* in Arabic has a very positive connotation, more akin to “pure” in English, and is also used to refer to food etc.

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Nādā has a blouse and fat comes onto it or something, with Nabulsi soap, it all goes away. "*dāyman baʔūl la-Nādā, dāyman basʔal banāti iza ʔindhum ʕābūn Nabulsi*", "I always say to Nādā, I always ask my daughters, if they have Nabulsi soap".

When my call with her mother disconnects by accident, Nādā confides that she remembers about the soap that comes in powder, when her mother went out, she put it on the floor, and then put water on it, to skate. They played, and one time, it became all water, and soap, and she did not know how to get rid of the water.

Nādā's father used to shower using something else, but he became allergic to it. Umm Nādā let him use Nabulsi soap, and it is all gone, the Nabulsi soap does not cause any allergies.

Talking about soap, Umm Nādā says she does not know a lot but will help me best as she can. She did a Google search, and found out that once there were 35 soap factories in Nablus. When the occupation came in 1967, only 5 were left, and it is like that to this day. This is because the borders were always open, and they exported to outside Palestine. When the borders were closed, the soap factories had to close, says Umm Nādā.

Soap is of course made with tools, because it is made in great quantities from olive oil. It consists of around 80% oil, 5% water, and they also put caustic soda to this mixture. It is mixed somehow, then cast onto the floor, they have forms of course, it is cut, and wrapped in a certain way. From what she knows, says Umm Nādā, if you want very clean soap, the farmers make it. If you want really clean soap, the farmers in the village make it at home, from their own olive oil.

Its importance was economic importance, more than anything. There was soap in every household, it was part of the life of families. It did not become irrelevant, but the number of soap factories declined. It used to be something that really helped people economically, but now there were not so many factories. It is not like it once was, once people relied on it a lot, and it brought income for many people. All the economy depended on soap, and they exported great quantities. Nowadays, they try to make nice forms, they renew it, to sell it to hotels.

Umm Nādā does not buy a certain brand, but she attaches importance to buying from *ʕabbānāt mrattabe*, "respectable soap factories", there are some she likes to interact with, there are some that do not cheat. Ṭūqān is good, Šakʕa is good, but there are some which put something else into the soap, according to Umm Nādā.

Umm Nādā thinks that Nablus is beautiful, and tells me that many who come to Nablus like to return. The city is beautiful, and the people are good, they welcome strangers. You feel that in Nablus, *fīha tarābuṭ, fīha ʔulfe*, "there is connection, there is unity".

Nablus is special before other cities, for this connectedness between people. The families know each other. Nowadays, it has become a little less, because many villagers come and live in Nablus, many who are not the original inhabitants of Nablus came from the areas around Nablus to live there. This is why the connection became less, but it is still there, especially in comparison with other cities. They feed each other, Umm Nādā says. Even if you do not talk to someone in Nablus, if they saw you outside of Nablus, they will treat you as if you were their sister, if they know that this person is from their city. A guy, might be embarrassed to speak to a girl, but if he saw her somewhere else, he will care for her as if she was his sister.

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The Nabulsi love each other and they are nice, but they talk about each other a lot. "This is because we all know each other, there is no one who does not know the others," says Umm Nādā.

Her husband's pharmacy is right in the middle of the city. Anyone who comes to the pharmacy, they need to know them. A stranger is easily spotted, and they want to know who this is, and this is why they talk about each other.

The families Umm Nādā mentions to me that are connected to soap making are Šakfa, Kanfān (but they built something else instead of their factory in the old city), and an-Nābulsi. There is also a new soap factory that Umm Nādā knows, they make pretty shapes out of Nabulsi soap. And there is also a factory directly at the *duwwār*, belonging to the Ṭūqān. This one was among the first soap factories, they built the factories in the Ottomann era, when the Ottomans came to Nablus.

Of the other old families in Nablus, there is the ʿĀmad, the ʿAbd il-Hādī, the Mašri, the in-Nabtāwi. Kanfān and Šakfa are also among the "good families", says Umm Nādā.

All the families in Nablus have a house in the old city. Her relatives have a house, the original house of her grandfather, in the old city. There are houses that are left and there are houses that have been restored, left intact but made better. In the ʿĀmad house, there is a branch of the Nağāḥ university, as it is a very big house. In a collaborative process, they renovated it and rented it for ten years. After that, it goes back to the ʿĀmad property. The houses are left for years, maybe 50 to 100 years, because everybody built on the mountain instead of in the old city. Now, they are renovating the old city in an orderly manner, they are renovating all the old houses, *bēt il-ʿĀmad*, *bēt ʿAbd il-Hādī* *bēt Ṭūqān*. They are making something beautiful out of it.

Umm Nādā considers soap to be heritage specific to Nablus, not general Palestinian heritage. "*illi ʔana bismaʕo, iṣ-ṣābūn bass bi-Nāblis*", "from what I hear, soap is only in Nablus", and there is no place that makes soap except Nablus. All the towns have olive oil, but only Nablus has soap.

The same is true for *knāfe*, only Nablus makes it, eat it in Ramallah, it is not tasty, Umm Nādā warns me. Although there are many shops that make *knāfe*, there are special ones, like Abu Šēr- "*xalāṣ, ʔūli Abu Šēr, li-knāfe mnīha*", "say Abu Šēr and the *knāfe* is good". There you can also get a sweet they call *kōl-ʔuškūr*, "eat and thank" because it is so good. There is also ʔoṣṣ it-tōm as a savoury food, they make it from a dough with eggs, and with garlic. In terms of language, Nablus has certain expressions that are only there in Nablus.

Asked about the best time for Nablus as a city in all of its history, Umm Nādā says that she knows before her time, before the British occupation, Nablus was a city that had a certain status and prestige. Why? Because of the railway that went past it, from old Yāfa to Ṭulkarm, then Nablus, and it went on to reach Saudi Arabia for the *ḥağğ*. Nowadays, the train line is gone.

The first railway line was made in the Ottoman era. In those days, it was like today the European union, there was no Syria, there was no Lebanon, there was no Palestine, you could just get in a car and go to Amman, or go to Beirut, or go to any place. There were no checkpoints or *ḥawāğiz*, "barriers" or "roadblocks".

Everything was influenced by the British mandate, on a community level, not only

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on a state level. For example, Ramallah and al-Bīre are "one street", why is one called Ramallah and the other is al-Bīre? Because Palestine was colonised, and the colonisation imposed division, says Umm Nādā. She tells me that Ramallah and al-Bīre were one town, one street, and that the British divided the country so they could rule more easily.

Of the times she lived, the 60s were the best days. Umm Nādā was little. People came to Nablus to study, they went to boarding schools and studied for the *tawǧīh*²⁷, the bachelor's degree, all that in Nablus. For some people, Nablus was the best city in terms of education.

In the 30s, all the women had put on the cover, the black scarf they call *ximār*²⁸. In the 60s, they all became free, and they took it off, and they wore tight trousers, Umm Nādā tells me. She regretfully says that now they have all gone backwards. They closed their minds with the scarf. Religion became as if it was just a scarf - not culture, not nature, if you have a scarf, you are good.

She concedes that of course, there are people who wear the scarf because of religious conviction, but if we are talking about the level of society, it is like that. Umm Nādā says that there are villages around Nablus where you will not find any women wearing this kind of facecloth. Why? Because the scarf is not religion, it is customs and traditions.²⁹

3.7. Şadīq

When I thank Şadīq for taking the time to talk to me, he says he thanks me, because he will gratefully give an interview about his city, which he loves very much. Şadīq was born in the family home in Nablus 71 years ago, "in the other room", he says and points to it, adding that his mother told him that. His family name comes from a profession that his father still used to work in, and his relatives had an olive oil press, and a mill to grind sesame³⁰, where his father also used to work. Şadīq went to primary school in Nablus. His mother was a learned woman in the 1920s. She had already finished the preparation stage and was about to become a teacher. But Şadīq's grandfather was a conservative man and forbade it. When Şadīq's mother married Şadīq's father, she cared very much for the education of her children, boys and girls alike. She was cultured and encouraged them to read, and so they became keen readers.

Şadīq continued through secondary school in Nablus at the Kulliyyet an-Nağāḥ il-Waṭaniyye.³¹ While he was in secondary school, the Israeli occupation began. The young man left school to take part in the defense operations as a volunteer in the army, a "patriotic duty", *wāǧib waṭani* to him. Palestine was occupied nonetheless. They retreated to Jordan, but Şadīq returned again *mutasallilan*, "sneaking in" over the military borders,

²⁷The important last year of secondary school that decides which branches of study in university are open to the student.

²⁸A facecloth that covers all but the eyes.

²⁹While *turāt*, "heritage" is used exclusively in a positive way, *ʿādāt w taqālīd*, "customs and traditions" is most often used to say people do not think about what they are doing and just do that to which they are accustomed.

³⁰Sesame was also a crop commonly grown around Nablus, cf. Graham-Brown 1982:132.

³¹Which later became an-Nağāḥ university.

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to live in Nablus. There, he took part in the first operations of resistance, but he was discovered and exiled. He managed to flee from being exiled³² and settled in Jordan for a while, where he was also part of the resistance, until in 1970 *intahat il-masʔale kullha*, “the whole thing ended”³³.

He went to Aleppo university in Syria, but could not finish his studies for political reasons. He had to leave the university and Syria. For some time, he worked in Kuwait as a clerk. When the civil war in Lebanon broke out, he joined the Palestinian resistance ranks there. He fought in Lebanon until 1980. In 1978, he had married his wife, also a *munādila waṭaniyye*, “nationalist fighter”. He returned once more to Kuwait.

Now, he divides his time between Amman and Nablus. Only in 2000, he got his identity papers and permission to return. Between 1969 and 2000, he was away from his city. When he returned, he discovered it anew. Şadiq says he did not know all about it before. Since 2000, he has been coming and visiting on a regular basis, and the family home he proudly shows me during our video call is in Nablus. He has four children, two boys and two girls, and six grandchildren.

One of his activities is taking people who do not know about the city on historical walks. He also works in heritage protection and preservation in the old city. He wrote a book together with another writer, called *Nāblus - māḍī wa-ḥāḍir* (“Nablus – past and present”). It shows pictures of Nablus taken from the internet and contrasts the buildings from a hundred years ago with photos Şadiq took of the modern buildings, and explains the changes in the place. It was a successful book and they sold the whole edition. Şadiq is now planning to print more copies. He also volunteers for caring for school gardens. They get trees from sponsors and gather the boys and girls to plant them with their own hands, under the supervision and with the help of adults.

He is proud to still live in the same place where he was born. The neighbourhood is called *ḥārat il-Ġarb*. It is the newest of the old quarters in Nāblus and was built in the 16th century, Şadiq tells me. Beginning in the east, the quarters of Nablus are *il-Qēsariyye*, *il-ʿAqabe*, *il-Ḥabale*, *il-Qaryūn*, *il-Yāsmīne*, and *il-Ġarb*, which was built just outside of *il-yāsmīne*. It spread outside of the city walls and outside of the old *sūq* in the 18th and 19th centuries until it reached the borders of Rafīdya.

To the south, the building Şadiq is in faces the *sūq il-ḥaddādīn*, and to the north, it faces Granada street. This street is named after a big cinema that used to be opposite the house. On the south side, at the end of the street, there is the *il-Ḥanbali* mosque. The house overlooks the quiet, old market. To the other side of the house, there is heavy traffic. When Şadiq opens the window to show me the street, there is street noise, cars honking.

The cinema does not exist anymore. It was a very big cinema, with a big theatre. In the 50s, it was an important cultural institution for Nablus. They showed mostly Egyptian films there.

In the old street, nothing has changed regarding the buildings, except that many have

³²The exact circumstances of this episode remained a little unclear to me. As I considered them secondary to the story, I did not undertake the effort to clarify them.

³³Şadiq is referring to the September 1970 clampdown by the Jordanian military on the Palestinian resistance that had operated from Jordanian territory.

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built a new story or two on top of the old building. The street is the same, and the market is the same. In this regard, not much has changed.

The *bāb is-sāḥa* with its clock tower in the old city, according to Ṣadīq, is the most Nabulsi place. There is a big empty space. It was established by a member of the Ṭūqān family, the Turkish mutaṣarrif of Nablus at the time. In the days of the Turks, it was used for public gatherings and announcements and such. The space is also called *sāḥat is-sarāya*, which was the seat of the Turkish government in the Ottoman era. Soap and *knāfe* are the most Nabulsi things for Ṣadīq. "*knāfe ka-folklōr bi-ṭ-ṭaṣām, murtabiṭa bi-Nāblis*", "*knāfe* as a folkloristic food, connected to Nablus".

The special thing about Nabulsi soap is the secret of its production. There are also secrets that are connected to the age of the oil: Some producers do not use oil from this year or the previous, but 4-year old oil. This gives it another flavour or smell.

His sister in Ġenīn makes traditional Nabulsi soap at home, and gives it to him. He uses it for his body and hair. Only the older generations buy this kind of soap. Youngsters buy shampoo and liquid soap - *iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi bass li-l-ġil l-kbīr*, "Nabulsi soap is only for the older generation".

Ṣadīq knows a lot about the history of Nablus and a lot about soap production, too. He tells me that once, there were 40 soap factories in the city. The economy was built on soap. Approximately in the 10th or 11th century, the production of Nabulsi soap began. Shortly before the crusaders came to Nablus, the Nabulsis had discovered the secret of soap production by adding a plant from the ʿAġlūn mountains and other natural ingredients to olive oil. The crusaders saw this and brought it to Europe. There are records of the properties, the olive groves and the soap factories of the crusaders in 1100 or 1120, Ṣadīq says.

The soap production developed gradually, until approximately 1760, when Nablus was ruled by a ruler called Āḥmad Farrūx Bāša. This one had a great idea. He collected the yearly due of taxes that he had to send to the sultān in Turkey, and decided to present this new invention – soap. And there in Istanbul, he asked for a reward. The reward was that they collected the pilgrims from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and let them gather in Nablus. So they gathered before the ḥāġġ in Nablus and also returned to Nablus thereafter. And since there were so many people, they all needed soap, and they needed a *ḥammām* to wash - Nablus had ten of them. They also needed a *xān* where they could sleep. Many industries grew, when the people came to go on the ḥāġġ. Soap production stayed like that until the 19th century. The means of traffic modernised, and also the roads used. The relations with Cairo and the Levant and Iraq developed, and the need for soap kept increasing, also in Venice, Sicily, Cyprus and Granada. Every family in Nablus that was concerned with accumulating wealth started to make soap in a factory. In 1850, a soap factory cost 8 000 qirš. This was a price no single family could pay. Therefore, they established joint ownership, and this is how there came to be 40 factories at the end of the 19th century.

This production ended for several reasons, the first of which was the invention of *ṣābūn taġmīli*, "beautifying soap" in Europe, that was brought to Arab countries such as Lebanon

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and Egypt. Nabulsi soap, with the “plant that had to soak”³⁴, became less popular, and they used caustic soda instead. In addition to that, there were tens of soap factories in Cairo and the Levant that called themselves “Nabulsi” without actually being located in Nablus. They were more developed, faster, and their prices were cheaper. Then, in 1948, the road to the sea was cut off from Nablus.

There is something else Şadīq wants to tell me that is related to soap: Many soap merchants who traded with Damascus had a second wife there. The Nabulsi merchant, whether he had a soap factory or not, and most did not, brought soap from the factory. When the merchant got the soap, he did not pay for it immediately. The soap makers in Nablus gave the soap in advance. For Şadīq, that speaks of trust in their city and its people.

The soap had not yet fully dried when the merchant put the soap in bags and went with it to Damascus. When he reached his destination, he did not sell the soap immediately, he put it in one of the *xānāt*. The more soap dries, the better it becomes. The Nabulsi merchant had to stay in Damascus until the soap had dried and he had distributed it to the shops and gained what it was worth. Sometimes, he collected the price in textiles or dried sweets or other precious goods and returned with them to Nablus to repay the factory owner. During the time they were waiting, some of the merchants had the need for a wife. They needed a woman, and they married, Şadīq tells me. The soap merchant in Damascus was viewed with respect, and the Damascene people married their daughters to them.

Thus, the merchant made a home in Damascus, and of course he had a home in Nablus. This way, the Damascene kitchen was brought to his Nabulsi wife, and the other way around, Şakkūb for example, and other dishes Nablus is special for. This explains the connection between Damascus and Nablus.

When I ask Şadīq if society has largely stayed the same or changed, he tells me the changes have been huge. In the 30s and 40s the traditions and how people treated each other was more conservative, in the family and the *ḥāra* and the market and the street.

The girl did not go outside except for urgent reasons, the woman also did not walk around except for urgent or necessary reasons. There was no mixing, there was separation of the sexes. Even the place where he is sitting now, was called the *ḥarāmlik*, the place for women, and the place for men, where they welcomed guests, was called the *salāmlik*.

Higher education until the 40s, early 50s was restricted to boys, except for rich families and cultured families, some of whom were sending their girls to school, but they were very, very few. In the 60s, maybe even the mid-50s and the 70s until the mid-70s, society witnessed great development. “We saw a development in the social relations. The customs, traditions, and how people treated each other began to change, but sadly, as soon as the 80s came, we witnessed regression and “a return backwards”, Şadīq says, *ruġūʿ ila l-xalf*. We lost all the progress and social developments, because of the religious changes and the salafiyya-movement³⁵ that impacted society.

Women had taken off the covering in the 50s and the 60s. In the 80s and 90s, they

³⁴ *Qilw*.

³⁵ A neo-conservative religious movement that spread from Saudi-Arabia to the whole Arab world.

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went back to wearing the *hiğāb*, the *burqa*, the *ğallabiyye* or *ğilbāb* and such³⁶. With this change in dress, also the brains, the mentality, the culture of the *hiğāb* came back, Şadīq says with regret. Not only the cloth returned, but also the mindset and the separation of the sexes, except within certain borders. The view of the woman as a religious value returned and in the most conservative parts of society, the belief that she is for reproduction and housework only, nothing else. She is not in the middle of society. Nablus still suffers from this, Şadīq thinks.

But not all conservativisms are bad. When Şadīq buys soap, he buys al-Muftaḥayn brand, which is made by the Tūqān factory. All renowned families had soap factories, and sometimes they had more than one. Şadīq recalls that Kanfān had three factories, Şāhīn also had more than two factories, Tūqān have one, but it is *ʿan ʿiddet maşābin, ʿarīqa*, “worth many soap factories, ancient”. The ʿAbd el-Hādi had two or three. Şadīq confirms that they were making soap not only for economic, but also for prestige reasons. He says there is a Syrian author who wrote about this, that the Nabulsi make soap in a fashion that was *ğēr tabīʿi w ġēr mubarrar*, “not natural and indefensible”.

Şadīq strongly agrees with Nabulsi soap being Nabulsi heritage. He says, it is Palestinian heritage at the same time, but mainly it is Nabulsi heritage.

The 60s, when Şadīq was about 11 years old, until the year 1966, immediately before the occupation, was the best time for Nablus in Şadīq’s opinion. He assures me that this is not his opinion only, but shared by many people. It was a period of continuity and stability. He tells me that they witnessed national, social, economic and cultural development, in short, progress on all levels. The relations with the neighbouring Arab countries were strong, especially with Egypt and the Egyptian universities. Nabulsi held many professorships, and scholarships for Nabulsi students paid by the Egyptian government facilitated their education in Egypt. Many Nabulsi doctors, engineers and teachers graduated from Egyptian universities. Also in the Syrian and Iraqi universities, the universities were proud that there was a Nabulsi in each of them. When the graduates came back, they brought development in terms of society and economy to Nablus.

The public library in Nablus was built in 1960, and it was the first public library in the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan, of which Nablus was a part. This was good for the culture. Şadīq says, he “drank” from this library – he did not read, but drank and ate from the books. Movies were premiered in Nablus at the same time they premiered in Cairo. Film stars came to Nablus, and Şadīq can list several that he saw in person. In Ramaḍān, famous Quran readers came and read the Quran, from the first day to the last. This golden era lasted until the occupation.

The worst time for Nablus was 2002, when the *iğtiyāh*, “invasion” happened, it was as if the occupation was happening again, Şadīq describes it. Huge tanks, with a weight of 80t were in the city, and there were war planes circling above. When a tank came to the city, it destroyed the walls of the buildings, from wall to wall to wall, it did severe damage. In the old city, the curfew lasted for 100 days. “We would have suffocated altogether”, Şadīq says, were it not for *il-ʿamal it-takāfuli*, lit. “solidarity work”. Şadīq tells me they hungered. It was a period of oppression. Şadīq lost his older brother.

³⁶Various items of women’s Islamic clothing.

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When I ask Şadīq if this was worse than the occupation in 1967, he strongly agrees and says, it was 100% worse. In the first occupation, the military operation lasted 3 days, and after that there was a military and administrative Israeli system, but the people lived in relative stability under those systems. There was not such strong oppression. Şadīq says, in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, *dallēna nḡāni yawmiyyan*, "we were suffering every day". The house he is in was partly destroyed three times. One time, he was at home when a plane strike hit the house and broke a pillar. The roof was about to collapse onto his and his sister's heads. They escaped narrowly.

Şadīq says it was hard, a really hard time, and asks if we can return to Nablus and its history. It is clear that talking about this has exhausted him, so we return to other topics of conversation.

When I ask Şadīq what makes Nablus special as a city, he says it is special for never being damaged fully in 2000 years. It was destroyed partially, a number of its inhabitants were killed, her³⁷ sons emigrated and returned, those who came from outside mixed with them, but there is a social fabric of the inhabitants that has preserved its existence for over 2000 years. The traditions and customs and the dialect have been passed on for 2000 years until now. This is what characterises Nablus compared to other cities, that the social fabric has stayed and has been uninterrupted since 2000 years ago, when the Romans built it. One of the reasons for this is that the eastern entrance to the city is narrow, and therefore easily defended, says Şadīq.

Characteristic for Nablus, according to Şadīq, is also another thing: it is a city that lies between two mountains. The southern mountain, Ğerizīm has lots of water, it has wells and trees, it is inhabited, the other, ʿAybāl, is not³⁸, it is dry, but there is sun all day, and plants that need heat and sun, like *şabr*, "agave" grow there.

³⁷Cities are commonly referred to using female pronouns, verb forms and imagery.

³⁸Apparently, Şadīq is talking about former times here. Mount ʿAybāl today is densely populated.

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The second thing to look at, after the historical outline and before the discussion, is what makes the everyday object of soap so peculiar. To start out, we will look at the technicalities and logistics of soap production, to then observe its economic and social importance and finally connect it to heritage and identity.

4.1. The production process

On a surface level, making soap is quite straightforward. Three ingredients are needed to produce it, the most important one being olive oil. The others are water and caustic soda, or in former times alkaline *qilw* and slaked lime. Only a handful of people who know what they are doing are all it takes to make the finest soap: Cook it, let it cool, cut it, stamp it and then stack it to dry. Depending on the quality of the oil, the result is a cube-shaped chunk of white or brownish-green soap that faintly smells of olive oil. Packaged in waxed paper, it is ready to be shipped and sold.

Seemingly, there is not much to it. But, like any old craft, soap making has its particularities, and the factories in Nablus had their own unique way of operating, both in the sense that the production process followed a particular pattern and in the sense that everybody involved in this business was very aware of how to negotiate their social status in relation to the business. It is with pride that families tell which role their ancestors used to have in the soap factories, and which role the soap factories used to have in the city. Every family held in high esteem had a soap factory registered on their name.¹

Gustav Dalman, who has written extensively on traditional Palestinian crafts in his eight-volume "Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina", offers a short chapter on the soap making process, as does Beshara Doumani, who gives a detailed description in Appendix 3 to "Rediscovering Palestine: merchants and peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900". Other descriptions are given in Arabic by local historians, such as Nabīl Māḡid an-Nābulī in the *at-turāt wa-l-muḡtamaʿ* journal issued by the *inʿāš al-ʿusra* organisation. I gained other information in interviews with Mojtaba Tbeleh of the "Nablus" soap company and Assem Haj Mohammad, sales manager of Haj Taher Masri soap company conducted in spring 2020. In addition to that, numerous newspaper articles, documentaries and archive pictures can be found to make the details more conceivable.

First, we will look at the soap factory as it used to be in the golden era of soap, when production was at a peak in the 19th and early 20th centuries: You enter the factory through a large iron or wooden door. To one side, a few steps lead to a room where you

¹Interview with Assem Haj Mohamed, confirmed in other interviews. See also Bontemps 2012.

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are greeted by the factory owner and the accountant. This is where customers and guests are welcomed.²

Each soap factory has wells for the storage of olive oil beneath the ground floor. The oil is brought there by merchants, who are met by the *šayyāl*. This first point of contact for the merchants is a worker who measures the quality of the oil and determines its price. The *šayyāl* places the goat-skin oil pouch called *daref* on a slanted table. This can be a rather lucrative job, as a generous tip might make him turn a blind eye to the water that collects at the bottom and indicates inferior quality of the oil.³ Because the oil is so precious, it also serves as a financial security and the factories are also credit institutions.⁴ Peasants can request the worth of the oil in cash from the factory owner should they need it throughout the year, but part of the oil they bring is already to pay back their debts from the previous year.⁵

Before caustic soda is introduced, chunks of alkaline ash from the *qilw*-plant (barilla plant, *salsola soda*) are ground in a large mortar (*ğurn*) with a hammer (*mdaqqqa*) or pestle (*mihbāš*). The finely ground ash is mixed with slaked lime (*šid*) and water and stirred. This alkaline solution is called *xamīr*.⁶

The ground floor has several basins for storing the *xamīr*, be it from *qilw* or caustic soda. The room is dominated by the large cooking vessel called *halle*, which can contain more than 5 tons of liquid. It has a copper floor that weighs up to two tons and is very costly, and a faucet called *mabzal* to remove the *xamīr* that collects at the bottom throughout the cooking process. This faucet is usually blocked with a plug wrapped in a piece of cotton and opened when needed. This part of the factory is the *balāt*.⁷ The people working here are the *ṭabbīxa*.⁸ When *qilw* was still in use, the alkaline mixture had to be poured into the *halle*, removed from the bottom and poured in again up to forty times for the oil to absorb enough alkali and solidify.⁹

One *ṭabxa* of soap equals 5 tons of olive oil, 50kg of caustic soda and 60l of water.¹⁰ There are of course storage facilities for the raw materials such as *qilw* and *šid*. There are three to seven wells for olive oil underground, each containing between 5-30 tonnes of oil, the largest of which was the *baḥra*.¹¹ Apart from the wells underground, olive oil is also stored close to the *halle* in the *ğanīb* that contains the amount of oil necessary for a single *ṭabxa* or batch of soap.¹²

When a new *ṭabxa* is being cooked, workers bring the *xamīr* to the *halle*, heat it and mix it with the oil. One of the lowest positions in the factory is that of the *raššāš* who heats the fire under the vessel, often using crushed olive pits which still contain some oil

²an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 95.

³Doumani 1995, p. 199.

⁴Doumani 1995, p. 184.

⁵an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 96.

⁶Dalman 1935, 274f.

⁷an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 95.

⁸*The Toukan Enterprise – The Business of Soap* 12.11.2020.

⁹an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 96.

¹⁰Dalman 1935, 276f.

¹¹Doumani 1995, p. 252.

¹²an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 95.

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Figure 4.1.: *ḥalle* for cooking soap. Courtesy of Alnaameh Nabulsi soap company. (*annaṣāma*)

after pressing, called *ḡift*. A few steps lead him down to his working place. The physically demanding jobs on this floor, such as carrying the oil and soap and stoking the fire, are done by unskilled workers. They carry a rather high risk of injury: being blinded by flying sparks or slipping and falling on the soap-caked floor.¹³

The whole process on the ground floor is overseen by a skilled worker who travels from one factory to another with his team. This worker, the *rayyis*, has a special role. He oversees the quality of the end product and is the only one allowed to stir the mixture using an oar-like wooden stick called *dukšāb*.¹⁴ He and his *ḡōqa* that consists of three to four men, work on a largely independent basis for several factories. Even though the *rayyis* is the uncontested leader, he does not have a saying who is part of his *ḡōqa*. That is determined by long-standing patronage and kinship relations, fathers pass on their job to their sons. This relative security makes up for being at the mercy of the *rayyis* and not being paid well for an exhausting and dangerous job to the workers. As for the *rayyis*, having the relative liberty and prestige of being the sole intermediary between the workers and factory owners is his reward for carrying the responsibility for his people and the quality of the product they produce.¹⁵

After a day of cooking, the oil begins to collect at the surface and the hot alkaline solution is removed through the faucet in the vessel and poured into a keg of caustic soda again, which dissolves. This even more alkaline solution is carried back to the vessel, with

¹³Doumani 1995, p. 200.

¹⁴Elsewhere sometimes *dikšāb*.

¹⁵Doumani 1995, p. 199.

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a special technique so as not to burn the worker. This is called *radd iz-zēt* and repeated two times. This phase is called *al-fasax al-ʔawwal*.¹⁶

How many rounds of pouring boiling hot alkaline solution into the *halle* the soap¹⁷ has to go through is determined by the texture and smell of the soap, sometimes even the taste, as well as the density of the *xamīr* removed through the *mabzal*. The *rayyis* smells and tastes the soap using a stick called *šammāme*.

After the *fasax al-ʔawwal*, when the oil has saponified a little, which in Arabic is called *tašabbun iz-zēt*, water is added and the solution is stirred vigorously using a wooden *maxāda*. After that, more gentle stirring is done using the *dukšāb* again. This step is called *al-fasax at-tāni*.¹⁸

After four to seven days of constant cooking and adding fresh *xamīr*¹⁹, the last day of cooking arrives. The fire is stoked anew to really boil the soap, and on the surface of the *halle* appears the *xitm il-ḡilw*, consisting of pure soap, while the rest of the mixture, superfluous alkali and water, collects at the bottom overnight.²⁰

Once the *rayyis* finds the soap is ready, the cooking vessel or *halle* is emptied with a round wooden bucket. This bucket, which has two handles, is used to harness the soap that floats on top of the mixture. Four to five of those buckets are poured into each metal vessel called *ḡilbet il-baṣṭ* used to carry the soap upstairs on the shoulders of workers. What remains in the *halle*, alkaline water, a liquid of a greyish or brownish colour, is thrown away. The workers begin cooking a new *ṭabxa* of soap.

The second team of workers takes over on the upper floor. They are three to four people, including their supervisor. The soap, almost white in colour if it is of high quality, is cast onto the limed floor or on a sheet of wrapping paper and allowed to dry. This process is called *baṣṭ*, and the area on the floor is the *mabṣat* or *mafraš*.²¹ With an oval wooden board, the *māleš*, that has a wooden handle, a worker makes sure the soap spreads evenly on the floor and is at the same level everywhere. The workers doing that are called the *bassīta*.²²

When sufficiently cooled and dried after a day in winter and two days in summer, another process step ensures each customer gets a bar of soap that meets all expectations: the soap is "peeled" with a wooden or iron bar called *mabšara*. This guarantees each piece of soap will be of equal height, allowing it to be perfectly cube-shaped in the end. Lines are drawn with the help of strings covered in red paint or white powder that are plucked to release a straight line on the soap²³. The string is called *al-bikar* and placed with the help of a *forḡār*, a pair of compasses. Then, the *xātime*²⁴ stamp the company logo onto each bar of soap with a hammer, or sometimes two hammers at the same time. By now, the soap is solid enough to step on it, but still soft enough to be cut with ease

¹⁶an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 97.

¹⁷...and the workers!

¹⁸an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 98.

¹⁹Dalman 1935, p. 275.

²⁰an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 97.

²¹an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 95.

²²*The Toukan Enterprise – The Business of Soap* 12.11.2020.

²³Doumani 1995, p. 254.

²⁴*The Toukan Enterprise – The Business of Soap* 12.11.2020.

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Figure 4.2.: Cutting soap by hand. Courtesy of Alnaameh Nabulsi soap company.

by the *ʔaṭṭi* with a so-called *šōke*, that of course has little to do with an actual fork. It is a contraption that consists of a stick that has a knife on its end.

Next to the *baṣṭ* where the soap is cut, after another day the impressive large round towers called *tanānīr* or *ṣawāmeʿ* are put up. This step in the process is called *tašbīk*. For each batch, 30-40 towers are made, each up to four meters high. The soap needs to be still a little moist so the bars will stick together. The higher the tower, the better the soap dries, which it does for several months.

The supervisors of both teams, the *rayyis* of the ground floor and the supervisor of the upper floor, are paid by the factory owner. They pass on the money according to a negotiated percentage to their workers.²⁵

Eventually, the cubes of soap are taken to the packaging station in a rubber vessel called *ʔuffe*, where they are wrapped in thin waxed paper similar to sandwich paper at considerable speed by the *laḥḥe*. The workers packaging the soap and putting it in large bags for shipping are not part of the two teams.

All the work being done upstairs was monopolised by the Ṭbēle family in the 19th century, to such an extent that a person doing this job, i. e. cutting, stamping and stacking the soap, is called a *ṭbēli* to this day, but the Ḥiğāzi, ʕAnnab and Kuxūn also had a tradition in the work of the *baṣṭ*. The downstairs work was dominated by the al-ʕĀṣ, Hudhud, al-Mṣāni and Marmaš families, with Doumani also listing the Fatāyir, Takrūri and Ġalyīni.²⁶ The Ṭbēle family, originally a very well-respected family that had merchants and religious leaders proudly carrying their name, came to work in soap

²⁵an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 97.

²⁶Doumani 1995, p. 200.

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Figure 4.3.: *xatm* or *mdaqqa* for stamping the factory logo onto the soap. Courtesy of Alnaameh Nabulsi soap company.



Figure 4.4.: Soap is stacked to dry. Courtesy of Nablus soap company.

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Figure 4.5.: Worker stacking the soap to form *tanānīr*. Courtesy of Nablus soap company.



Figure 4.6.: *tanānīr* of soap at the Alnaameh soap factory. Courtesy of Alnaameh Nabulsi soap company.

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Figure 4.7.: The original packaging in waxed wrapping paper. This kind of soap and packaging can still be found in Nablus, but is unfit for shipping. Courtesy of Alnaameh Nabulsi soap company.

factories as artisans by the late eighteenth century, although they had previously owned their own soap factory and were intermarried with the Xammās and other leading families. Today, they are once again involved prominently and successfully in soap production and its modernization, not as artisans, but as factory owners.

This is the process as it is known and recalled. Even when people consciously know that soap today is produced industrially, this is the idealised way of making traditional soap. When asked if they know how soap is produced, none of my interviewees described an automated process, as is the norm in modern soap factories that produce in great quantities for export. Mixing the soap, work that decides the quality of the end product, is done by a machine, as is the cutting and sometimes the packaging. The reason for this is obviously that it saves workers and therefore cost, but it also makes the soap meet international standards for shipping. While an-Nābulsi in 1974 is proud that the difference in weight between bars of soap is only 5-10g, this is of course too much for modern standards. Also, the big bars weighing half a kilo have become rare, and pieces of 120-125g were much more common already in the 1970s, when an-Nābulsi wrote his account.²⁷

Much has changed in the production of soap, not only the technical aspects, but also the social ones. Only the higher jobs in the factory are passed on through families, while the unskilled workers are employed on the basis of supply and demand.²⁸

²⁷ an-Nābulsi 1974, p. 99.

²⁸ Interview with Mojtaba Tbeleh.

4.2. The site of production

Soap making has a long tradition in Nablus. Some even say that soap was first produced in the Middle East, proudly claiming that Nablus is the origin of all soap, with others only copying their ingenious invention. Although this is unlikely, it speaks of the great pride Nabulsi take in their soap. Some others invoke the status of soap as ancient and already existent in the 3rd century in the Italian city of Pompei, cite Spain and Marseille in France as predecessors of Nabulsi soap and praise it as a sign of progress and civilisation to use soap for cleaning.²⁹ Be that as it may, soap production in factories in Nablus dates at least as far back as the 14th century, well before the Ottoman period, and its importance for the city's economy and social stratification can hardly be overestimated.³⁰ The famous Arab traveller and author Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in the 14th century already mentions Nablus and its olive oil³¹: "Then, I went from [Ramla] to the city of Nablus, and it is a great city with many trees, through which rivers flow, in the Levant, it is one of the [places] with the most olives, and olives are brought from there to Egypt and Damascus." (Translation by the author.)³²

During the 18th and 19th centuries, when Nablus was under Ottoman rule, it was a centre of trade and industry for all of Palestine. The wider region known as Ġabal Nāblus produced an agricultural surplus that allowed it to develop industrial production and export goods. The farming methods, unchanged over long periods of time, were adapted perfectly to the rocky ground.³³ Nabulsi soap really stands out for consisting only of olive oil, while for most other soap, the percentage of olive oil is only 10-20% and other plant oil or even animal fat is used alongside it.³⁴

The logistics of obtaining the ingredients and workers needed, as well as selling the soap arguably remain difficult today. Being a capital-intensive as well as time-consuming undertaking, the role soap production played in the city's economy is complex. To make a batch of soap, the factory owners had to secure raw materials one year in advance, and making, packaging, shipping and selling the soap took another year during which the factory owner made no profit. The large factory buildings and production tools, especially the copper vessel for cooking soap were also very expensive. Thus, factories were often jointly owned and merchants commissioned batches of soap: They provided the raw materials, especially the oil, and got a fixed amount of the end product to sell.³⁵ It is here that the intricate logistics of soap making unfold, and it is not surprising that the families primarily involved in such a sophisticated business activity were the Ṭūqān, Nimr, and later ʿAbd il-Hādī families, among others, all of whom played a big role in politics as well. First, families involved in politics produced soap, but slowly it came to be the other way around: Those who produced soap also played a role in politics.

²⁹ an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 94.

³⁰ Doumani 1995, p. 185.

³¹ an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 94.

³² Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa 1853.

³³ Doumani 1995, p. 3.

³⁴ an-Nābulṣī 1974, p. 96.

³⁵ Doumani 1995, 187f.

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How important and successful a trade it was is attested in an anecdote that Beshara Doumani describes: The Ṭūqān family sold the Ḥallaqiyya soap factory to Muḥyī ad-Dīn ʿArafāt, himself heir to a tradition of textile merchants, in 1829. When he sold it again eleven years later, its price had increased 500%. Clearly, the soap industry was a thriving business at the time, at least in Nablus. While other sectors stagnated and other cities witnessed a decline in soap production, the number of factories in Nablus tripled.³⁶

"The high quality of the soap ensured a steady demand, especially from Egypt. 'Nabulsi soap' became synonymous with a certain quality standard, and even soap produced elsewhere proudly boasted 'Nabulsi quality'."³⁷ as Doumani explains it. This holds true even today. Several Egyptian soap making companies claim to be making "Nabulsi soap", even when none of the ingredients are from there and none of the production takes place in the city, for example "Nabulsi Shaheen" soap in Cairo.^{38,39} The most often cited example of this appropriation is the Shemen soap factory near Haifa, which was originally founded as a plant-oil producing company and from 1922 on also produced soap.

In the 1930s, soap production suffered a setback when Egypt and Syria introduced a tax on imported soap. Counterfeiting increased the pressure on the manufacturers. Even though the lack of protection for the trademark meant great damage for the reputation of Nabulsi soap at that time, it is also a source of pride that many soap factories boast a line they call "Nabulsi", often only meaning it is olive oil soap, with no further connection to the city itself. Soap makers responded by establishing brands, some of which exist to this day.⁴⁰

Nablus was perfectly situated for soap production. It mainly profited from its location and climate. The fertile rural area around the city produced so much olive oil that not all of it was needed for human consumption. The secret to Nablus' great agricultural productivity was, of course, water. 22 wells supplied the city's public fountains, mosques and rich private households with the precious good. The water also ran down the irrigation canals in the valley.⁴¹ For soap production itself, quite a large amount of water is needed.

The lime came from three villages east of Nablus, Sālīm, ʿAwartā and Beyt Fūrīk, all three closely connected to the Nimr family, originally through the Ottoman *timār* system in the 17th century.⁴²

Moreover, Nablus is also located close to the Jordan valley, where the barilla plant, *qilw* or *qily* in Arabic and root of the word "alkaline", grows.⁴³ Bedouins, who used to roam the valley, collected the *qilw*-plant (*ʿuṣb il-qilw* or *ṣiḥ*).⁴⁴ burned it and brought the alkaline ash to the city in caravans. Thus, obtaining this important ingredient depended on good relationships with the bedouins in a region that stretched as far as as-Salt in modern-day Jordan and Tadmur (Palmyra) in Syria, particularly the Bani Sakhar, Ḥuwayṭāt and

³⁶Doumani 1995, p. 183.

³⁷Doumani 1995, p. 185.

³⁸*Nabulsi Shaheen* 11.11.2020.

³⁹*Seen in Cairo: Nabulsi Shaheen Soap Factory* 11.11.2020.

⁴⁰Bontemps 2012, p. 281.

⁴¹Doumani 1995, p. 23.

⁴²Doumani 1995, p. 193.

⁴³Doumani 1995, p. 184.

⁴⁴Dalman 1935, p. 274.

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ʿAdwān tribes. Unlike descriptions of nomadic bedouins frequently raiding and destroying villages, the bedouins that supplied the *qilw* were allied to Nablus through trade relations and political affiliation. Apparently, they were even subordinate to the city's political leaders at times, in the form of strong and valued, but still junior partners.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the boundary between bedouins and peasants was fluent. Sometimes bedouins became sedentary, and sometimes peasants became nomadic, if the need arose. Later portrayed as backward and barbaric, this does not do justice to the Bedouins, who participated actively in trade with villages and the city. Many tribes were linked to urban centres and supported them in uprisings against the Ottomans and the British Mandate, as was the case not only in Nablus, but also in Hebron, Jerusalem and Gaza. Nablus and Salt merchants also brought *qilw* to other soap making centres such as Jerusalem, Lydda, Jaffa, Gaza and Acre.

Those trade relations are also the basis for an ongoing Nabulsi presence in Salt in particular, and Jordan in general, and the reason why wealthy members of Nabulsi families later formed parts of the Jordanian government in the early stages of the Jordanian nation state.⁴⁶ This is also attested in the linguistic influence the urban Nabulsi dialect has on modern-day Jordanian dialect.⁴⁷ The river Jordan never served as a border until 1923, when the Emirate of Transjordan, a British protectorate, declared independence. In the 1860s, caustic soda was introduced. It was bound to eventually replace the alkaline obtained by the lengthy process of burning *qilw*.⁴⁸ It briefly became an important source again during WWII, when the supply of caustic soda from Britain dwindled.⁴⁹ After WWII, *qilw* became fully redundant. Caustic soda was imported from Alexandria and Europe.⁵⁰

For several decades, soap producers made a steady 20%-30% profit on the soap they sold, and it must have been a profitable business for the merchants, too, who bore the greatest financial burden because olive oil was the most expensive ingredient of soap and the wait for the soap to be sold was long.⁵¹

Economic and political changes after the First World War were positive regarding soap production.

4.3. Modern soap

Even though the portrayal of Palestine as generally "backwards" in the early 20th century certainly was informed by orientalism, soap production relied largely on manual labour, and automatisisation was undertaken tentatively at best. "In 1923, Hajj Nimr al-Nâbulṣī was the first soap-factory owner to import machines. Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s, producers from the Nâbulṣī and the Kanaʿân families imported machines from England

⁴⁵Doumani 1995, 201ff.

⁴⁶Doumani 1995, pp. 203–205.

⁴⁷Al-Wer 2007, p. 57.

⁴⁸Doumani 1995, p. 203.

⁴⁹*The Toukan Enterprise – The Business of Soap* 12.11.2020.

⁵⁰Bontemps 2014, p. 3.

⁵¹Doumani 1995, p. 193.

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and Germany."⁵² The long-standing relationship between soap producers and workers might have slowed down their replacement by machines, but probably this spoke of a declined interest in soap production as a purely economic endeavour and a shift towards a more nostalgic approach to soap production: the production of soap for the purpose of preserving and performing the status of an urban notable.⁵³

In the 1950s, "green soap" was invented, i.e. soap made from *ǧift* oil, the remains of pressed olives. This shifted the power dynamics between factory owners and workers, as it allowed less wealthy individuals to venture into the soap business themselves. The soap, called "green" because of its darker colour resulting from the oil of lesser quality, was used for laundry and cleaning, but soon faced competition from detergents and washing machines.⁵⁴

In 1974, an-Nābulṣi knows of 35 operational soap factories, big and small, in Nablus, some of them operating all year round and others only from time to time. Most of them, according to him, lie in the Old City, and the buildings are hundreds of years old. He also mentions that some of the factories have modernized and introduced machines, while others still rely entirely on manual labour.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on the productivity of those two types of factories.

The first intifāḍa made work in the Old City difficult and dangerous. Many factories had to close in the 1990s in its aftermath.⁵⁶ Most others moved to the newer industrial areas outside the city.⁵⁷

A major rupture in the recent history of Nablus and therefore in soap production was the direct military incursion by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in April 2002, which cost 119 people their lives. By 2004, the death toll among Palestinians had risen to almost 600. The people were severely traumatized by the almost nightly incursions, the curfews imposed on them and the isolation Nablus underwent following the events, being cut off from the rest of the West Bank as well as its hinterlands.⁵⁸ In all Palestinian territories, 1,192 people were killed in 2002.⁵⁹ Soap exports suddenly dropped from 1,200t to 700 or 800t per year.⁶⁰

Today, there are only four factories still fully functional that I know of: al-Muftaḥayn by the Ṭūqān family, producing exclusively traditional soap, Nāblus by Mojtaba Tbeleh, who modernised his production and sells organic soap with various scents, Anwar Kanṣān by the Kanṣān family who also own the an-Nimr brand, producing both a line of liquid soaps and shampoos as well as cleaning detergents and sanitizers, while also making traditional soap and soap flakes for cleaning under the Nimr brand, and al-Ǧamal by the Šakṣa family, also a famous brand for traditional soap. Bontemps 2012 also mentions al-Mašri, and there is an-Naṣma produced in Jordan which is also of Nabulsi origin.

⁵²Bontemps 2012, p. 286.

⁵³Bontemps 2012, 284f.

⁵⁴Bontemps 2012, p. 282.

⁵⁵an-Nābulṣi 1974, p. 95.

⁵⁶Bontemps 2012, p. 281.

⁵⁷Interview with Mojtaba Tbeleh.

⁵⁸Doumani 2004, p. 37.

⁵⁹Kamal 2015, p. 17.

⁶⁰Bontemps 2012, p. 283.

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Interestingly, only one person I spoke to mentioned politics or generally dire economic conditions as the reason for the decline in soap production⁶¹. Others outright denied politics had anything to do with it⁶². The decline in sales and the dwindling number of soap producers is attributed to younger generations preferring scented and colourful soap and liquid shampoos. This complaint, however, is not new. Already in the 1950s and 1960s there were attempts to create a "soap like Lux"⁶³, a Unilever brand often used synonymously with "synthetic scented soap". Only a few soap producers tried to modernize their soap and have added other ingredients such as essential oils for scent and additional benefits. Particularly the Second intifāḍa, when it came up in the interviews, was described rather as a personal traumatic experience than as a watershed event that impacted economy⁶⁴.

One example of a modern soap factory is that of Mojtaba Tbeleh. The Ṭbēle family has been involved in soap production for more than 400 years. The factory is claimed to have been established in 1611, producing the trademark "Nablus" soap. It gained the EcoCert for organic products, a fact that Mojtaba Tbeleh tells proudly. He is also proud of his very own invention, a "family secret": a soap making process that has advantages from both the "hot process" and the "cold process" of making soap. Soap made in the "hot process" has the advantage of not melting easily when it comes in to contact with water, a quality that is traditionally very important in Nabulsi soap. The "cold process", however, has the advantage of maximising the moisturizing effect of the soap for the skin. According to Mojtaba Tbeleh, he has fused the two processes.

Tbeleh says there are three competing soap factories today. Of the 46 he knows were still operating in the 1980s, almost all have closed. He does not attribute the fact that the factories moved out of the old city to political matters, but rather sees it as a result of the growth of the city.

He says, the goal and process of the production are still the same, but machines have replaced humans, and they guarantee more reliable quality and are of course much faster. Similar to traditional soap production, only a few skilled workers are needed. The rest are ordinary workers, who in old times worked under the supervision of the *rayyis*, now tend to the machines.

Of the many stories and myths that surround Nabulsi soap, there is for example that of Queen Elizabeth II of England bathing only with Nabulsi soap. Quite a few myths are funnily absurd, such as curing all kinds of skin problems (including, of course, cancer) as well as hair loss⁶⁵.

One myth, however, stands out: Olive oil, the very ingredient that makes Nabulsi soap so famous, is too expensive to get from Palestine, and it is actually cheaper to import

⁶¹Interview with Nādā.

⁶²Interview with Mojtaba Tbeleh.

⁶³Bontemps 2012, p. 286.

⁶⁴The description of an event in terms of its immediate effect is naturally more evident when only touched on briefly. What interested me, though, was its absence as an explanation for the decline of an industry

⁶⁵Mentioned to me in several interviews, as well as in comments on Youtube videos on soap production and the Facebook pages of soap factories.

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olive oil from Italy, Spain or Turkey, where you can get the same quality for a better price. Like many goods, importing is more feasible than going through the hassle of obtaining the oil locally. Palestinian olive oil is used for food, and another reason for the high prices mentioned to me is that Palestinian olive oil is believed to be holy because it grows in the "holy land", which makes it expensive⁶⁶.

In addition to that, Nablus was cut off from the surrounding villages by checkpoints, making it difficult or impossible to obtain the much sought-after good. According to sources like Tartir⁶⁷ and Rickard⁶⁸, it is a mix of Israeli policy to keep the Palestinian territories dependent on imported goods and PA neoliberalism that sees greater value in profits than in self-sufficiency that hampers the development of efficient Palestinian agriculture. This naturally impacts the possibility of selling the produce at the local market, because the laborious and costly production makes the product more expensive than imported goods industrially produced. Many olive groves have also been destroyed by Israeli settlers, driving the prices of local olive oil up.⁶⁹

The olive tree proudly taking root in the sanctified soil, the farmers plucking the olives and bringing them to the press and the oil to the factory, is a myth. Yet people believe in the purity of Nabulsi soap because they believe in the purity of Palestinian olive oil. Even people who were aware of the oil for soap being imported, made a connection between soap and Palestinian olive oil, and this connection is deliberately enforced by advertisements for Nabulsi soap. The olive tree bears a special symbolism for Palestinians. It is a tree that can grow very old and has to be tended for many years before its fruit can be harvested. It therefore symbolises a Palestinian connection to their land.

A general sense of nostalgia is obvious surrounding Nablus and Nabulsi soap. This is only in part a generalised longing for better days that lie in the past, as can be found anywhere. The nostalgia also has very real reasons. "[...T]oday Nablus is a broken city. For the first time in hundreds of years, it has been forcibly separated from its hinterland for an extended period of time. And never in memory have so many of its merchants, historically the very people most involved in the construction of the Nablus region as a culturally and economically discrete social space, abandoned their cherished city in droves and moved their businesses to Ramallah, Amman, and elsewhere."⁷⁰ Beshara Doumani writes in 2004.

What made a big difference for modern soap producers is the new demand for organic skincare products and the interest in a non-damaging way for everyday care. Chemical stuff is bad for the body, as the common belief goes, and this is a global movement, allowing soap companies in Nablus to cooperate with initiatives worldwide. Tbeleh sells most of his soap outside of Palestine, in the USA and Europe. "Nablus" soap tries to move with the times, yet has not abandoned the production of traditional soap. Exporting soap is not new to Nablus, but relying on exports is: "[...] Nablus was neither a large metropole nor the administrative capital of a province. The difficult, hilly terrain and its

⁶⁶Interview with Mojtaba Tbeleh.

⁶⁷*Economic Dimensions Militarized Palestine* 20.03.2021

⁶⁸Rickard 2013.

⁶⁹Bontemps 2014, p. 3.

⁷⁰Doumani 2004, p. 49.

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geographical location helped preserve its autonomy and protect it from imperial armies, but at the expense of making it unsuitable for international trade. Historically, however, intraregional and interregional trade were far more important to the economy of Palestine, and Nablus was ideally situated for both."⁷¹

There are also initiatives in place to modernise soap on a small scale. Those are mostly NGOs with a predominantly Western group of buyers in Europe and the Americas, supportive of Palestinians. These initiatives support local women's organisations and often do use locally sourced olive oil. For the production, they rely on the expertise of workers or former workers in soap factories. On a bigger scale, this seems to be unfeasible."⁷²

Before 2002, 1200t of soap were exported from Nablus annually, primarily to Jordan, with which Nablus has long-established trade and familial ties. After 2002, only 700-800t per annum were exported. Nonetheless, it was still the most-exported Nabulsi product in 2004 and the second most in 2005."⁷³

While in actuality, production machines take over most of the work and the packaging is a small cardboard box instead of the waxed paper so the soap does not get spoilt on the way to the European customer, the image of traditionality is still very important for marketing and identity purposes. For a TV report the Qatari channel Aljazeera did on Mojtaba Tbeleh's factory, traditional soap making instruments such as the *mabšara* were on display, as well as a handful of people acting as *lafife*, sitting at a table and wrapping bars of soap. The new packaging is an interpretation of a *kūfiyye*-pattern, the Palestinian scarf that came to be symbolic for the Palestinian struggle worldwide, and even dissociated from Palestine to signify struggle or opposition in general.

There is, however, a big problem inherent in the modernisation of Nabulsi soap: By never changing it, it runs the risk of becoming outdated and obsolete. But by changing it too much, it ceases to be the "original" Nabulsi soap. This dilemma, which Nablus' soap producers navigate very carefully, is discussed at length by Bontemps"⁷⁴

Making soap is not an endeavour that follows the logic of the market alone. Bontemps also mentions an affectionate dimension of making Nablus a city that is "whole", not a city of victims of dynamics they cannot control. "Working in the soap industry, an old industry, considered local and urban heritage (*turāt*), was rewarding for my interlocutors, and in this sense I considered this endeavour: it offered the possibility of moving the focus away from a vision of the inhabitants of Nablus as simple victims. It allowed for considering Palestinian (and Nabulsi) society as a society in its own right, with its own history, ruptures and continuities, the analysis of which cannot be reduced to the political or strategic prism of the conflict with Israel."⁷⁵ (My translation.)

⁷¹Doumani 1995, p. 23.

⁷²Cf. Bontemps 2014.

⁷³Bontemps 2009, p. 31.

⁷⁴Bontemps 2012

⁷⁵Bontemps 2009, p. 26.

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Figure 4.8.: A piece of soap from the "Nablus" factory as it used to look...



Figure 4.9.: ...and what the packaging looks like now. The content has remained unchanged. Note how the packaging plays with the pattern of a *kūfiyye*. Both courtesy of Nablus soap company.

5. Soap, wealth and power

Having looked at the (hi)stories of Palestine and soap production, one last important part of history needs to be addressed before discussing how Palestinian and Nabulsi identity took shape and finally linking all chapters to the interviews: The social history of Nablus. In this chapter, we will particularly look at the continuities among the prominent families of Nablus, for two reasons. Firstly, they were the ones most notably involved in soap production. Secondly, by the example of soap production and through the material available on Nablus' notables, the continuities in Nabulsi society, which are often emphasised and mentioned as a resource for the resilience of the city, become evident.

5.1. Family finance

Soap production was capital intensive and apt for the accumulation of wealth, which we can see taking place in Jabal Nablus as early as the 18th century. Within the families who profited from it, the money ran straight to one or two dominant male members of the family. Once again, like so often in history, the resources of females were absorbed into the "family firm".¹

What was so costly about making soap? Firstly, there was no return on investment for up to three years because of the lengthy process of production and selling. Secondly, soap making required expensive equipment and a large building. Thirdly, the ingredients were also costly.² Doumani lists for the Yusufiyya-factory: "Of the total capital invested in that year [1885-86], 64 percent went toward the purchase of qilw; jift cost 6.6 percent; lime, 4.3 percent; labor, 10.6 percent; rent, 3 percent; and miscellaneous expenses, 11.5 percent."³ By not listing olive oil, clearly the most expensive ingredient, it becomes apparent that this was not usually purchased by the soap factory. Instead, the merchants who brought the oil were also the merchants who sold the soap, and the exchange between oil and soap was direct: Merchants bought oil and commissioned batches of soap. That means, they acquired oil from peasants and brought it to the factories. They were not paid until the soap was ready, when they received their payment in the form of bars of soap. They then sold the soap and hoped to make a good margin on it. That also means they were credit-givers to the factory owners and the oil that was stored in the well beneath the factory was their security.

To bear the high costs, joint effort was required, and both factory owners and merchants paid their share. Moreover, joint ownership of factories was common.⁴ An early form of

¹Doumani 1995, p. 184.

²Doumani 1995, p. 187.

³Doumani 1995, p. 192.

⁴Doumani 1995, pp. 187-188.

5. Soap, wealth and power

venture capitalism is also found in the organizational structure of soap factories. Wealthy individuals could fund the cost of workers, for example, and receive a percentage of the profits in return.⁵

Some patriarchs, such as the Bištāwī brothers in the mid-19th century, were able to concentrate so much power and wealth in their hands that they could work as factory owners and merchants at the same time, thus paying for the entire production of some batches of soap from the olive to the bar of soap, where others were at the mercy of merchants who commissioned soap. This indicates a gradual shift of economic power towards the merchant class.

Those soap-makers who were wealthy enough also engaged in money-lending in *salām*-loans to peasants, financing their year's production and being paid back at the time of harvest. A record showing where they lent their money to shows that it was concentrated in a single sub-district: They were gaining economic and political influence in a specific part of the rural surroundings of Nablus, a frequent strategy of city merchants. This shift in economic activity also shows a shift in political activity. Merchant families gradually became factory owners, and the two no longer were a distinguishable class.⁶

The factories, or parts of them, were often endowed in the Islamic institution of *waqf*. There are generally two types of *waqf*: A charitable endowment (*waqf xayrī*) and the so-called "family *waqf*" (*waqf ʔahlī*). Those institutions have requirements that differ slightly according to the four branches of Sunni Islam, but they are all designed to make a good unchangeable, such as maintaining a school, mosque or soap factory over time. They always have beneficiaries, in the case of a family *waqf*, the donor's own family.⁷ To make it part of a *waqf*, it was not necessary to own the whole factory. Partial ownership of a factory could also be endowed in a *waqf*, and changes to the physical state of the factory had to be approved by a court, although this seems to have been a mere formality.⁸

The reason for this was to protect the heritage from fragmentation through marriage. The primary purpose of endowing a factory as *waqf* was to protect it in inheritance cases: only direct male descendants could benefit, which meant that no one could inherit the factory by marrying one of the family's daughters.⁹ It also offered some kind of protection from the factories being arbitrarily confiscated or other perils of political upheaval.¹⁰ The copper *halle* was so expensive, it was often owned separately from the factory, jointly owned or endowed in a separate *waqf*.¹¹

That meant that the factory was *de iure* owned by no one as it was a *waqf*, but this *waqf* had a *wakīl* or superintendent, who usually was a family member of the founder and appointed by him. The *waqf* had beneficiaries, who were also members of the family. *De facto*, those were the ones that profited from the factory, and the *wakīl* served as the head of business as if he was the owner. In some cases, a part of the factory was a *waqf*

⁵Doumani 1995, p. 192.

⁶Doumani 1995, 195f.

⁷Peters et al. 2012

⁸Doumani 1995, p. 191.

⁹Doumani 1995, p. 188.

¹⁰Doumani 1995, 188f.

¹¹Doumani 1995, p. 252.

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xayrī that served a public or charitable purpose such as a school or mosque. Another major difference was that *ʔawqāf* (sing. *waqf*) could not be sold at will.¹²

The institution of family *waqf* has now long been abolished, as a system of private property ownership was established. *ʔawqāf xayriyye* were expropriated by the British mandate during the Arab revolt of 1936 and transferred to an Islamic committee by the Israeli Knesset in 1965. *ʔAwqāf ʔahliyye* were released to their benefactors. If those were not located, the *waqf* was deemed absentee property.¹³ This development certainly played a role in the decline of soap production, as the now private property could be changed, sold, and inherited. Some of those who became wealthy through soap production still belong to the wealthy families of Nablus to this day, others do not. But all prominent families of Nablus known today were at some point involved in soap production. Every family that has economic power had a soap factory, and the factory was proudly registered in their family name.¹⁴

5.2. Traditional elites

Nablus' society is known to be very traditional for a number of reasons. For once, most Palestinian societies have remained traditional, especially in the Palestinian territories, with the possible exception of Ramallah. Israeli policies that separate Palestinian urban centres from each other through checkpoints, settlements and highways for the exclusive use of Israelis favour a certain kind of localism and prevent the development of a connected urbanity throughout Palestine. Taraki speaks of a "contraction of Palestinian social worlds" because of the ongoing occupation and describes Nablus as a city of "parochial localism".¹⁵ "[...]monitoring by international, Palestinian, and Israeli agencies and organizations has shown the policy of fragmentation's devastating impact on the economy, social networks, the provision of basic services such as healthcare and education, and the prospects for an end to Israel's colonization of the West Bank and Gaza."¹⁶

Likewise, the relative powerlessness of the Palestinian authority government makes people rely on the immediate power of their neighbour more than on the abstract power of governmental institutions. These dynamics make Nablus incredibly resilient in the face of constant threat and obstacles that strangle the economy, but they also keep elites in place that have essentially dominated the city for centuries. In short, it preserves traditional ways of handling social life, at times for the better and at others for the worse. Old affiliations are perpetuated even when the economic reason for them is no longer existent. But, on the other hand, the economic necessity might more often than not actually be there - both because the activities of the notables have shifted from politics to economics, as we have seen, and because the complicated system of neighborhood alliances is potentially very efficient.¹⁷

¹²Peters et al. 2012

¹³Pappé 2006, p. 156.

¹⁴Interview with Assem Haj Mohamed, conducted in May 2020.

¹⁵Taraki 2008, p. 6.

¹⁶Taraki 2008, p. 6.

¹⁷Cf. Kamal 2015.

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Ramallah is seen in sharp contrast with Nablus regarding the local elite: "Ramallah, having long since lost its native sons and daughters and therefore not burdened with an entrenched local elite (such as was left largely intact in Nablus and Hebron, for example), was taken over by the PA's new political administration with its many security apparatuses and departments."¹⁸

Taraki cites Graham Brown as describing Nablus as "dominated socially by a group of 'well-established landowning and merchant families who set a generally conservative social tone. Despite the wealth of individuals and families, it is not a prosperous or outward looking town.'"¹⁹ Whether we share this rather harsh judgment or not, we will look at the career of the families that shaped Nablus and try to understand how they developed their influence. While of course, much has changed over the centuries, there are a number of actual continuities, and what is perhaps more important, there is a strong perceived continuity regarding the social fabric of Nablus.

In old times, soap production required the joint efforts of many actors: from the peasants and bedouins, as suppliers of raw material, to the merchants who brought the material to the factories and also financed part of the production, to the workers and finally the sellers and customers, in addition to the wealthy credit-givers who were sometimes involved. Therefore, having political influence was not so much a convenience as it was a necessity to ensure the success of this endeavor. "[...] political power was important to soap production because factory owners needed great influence in order to bring together the various factors and forces of production. In order to secure supplies and labor, they had to construct a complex network that involved a wide range of geographically dispersed social groups: peasants in Jabal Nablus and Ajlun who produced and transported the olive oil and lime [...]; bedouins on the east bank of the River Jordan who gathered the barilla plant in huge quantities, burned it, and transported the ashes to Nablus in large caravans; teams of artisans and workers who cooked, cut, and packaged the soap; and merchants who acquired oil, commissioned cooked batches (tabkhas) of soap, and operated regional trade networks. Without a modicum of political power or, at least, access to such power, the merchant community could not invest heavily in soap production, and the city's natural advantages in comparison to some other soap producing centers would have amounted to little."²⁰

This could only be achieved by the members of elite families. An elite family in Palestine usually had a genealogy stretching back to the prophet, and they were more likely to have such a history when they were from one of the "old cities", like Nablus.²¹ Chorev-Halewa describes the elite families' structure by their "family organizations", in which individuals assume the roles of leaders, functionaries and power base. These organisations have economic or political power as their goal.²²

The sphere of influence of prominent Nabulsi families was not limited to Nablus. It spanned a wider area in the northern West Bank. The ʿAbd il-Hādīs, for example, also

¹⁸Taraki 2008, p. 13.

¹⁹Taraki et al. 2006, p. 17.

²⁰Doumani 1995, 186f.

²¹Pappé 2006, p. 19.

²²Chorev-Halewa 2018, p. 3.

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had several castles in the town of ʿArrāba.²³ Some notable families were able to maintain their status, because they were able to adapt to changing economic and political powers. More anecdotal evidence is provided by Doumani: When Sayyid ʿAbd el-Qādir ʿAfandi Ḥanbalī died deeply in debt, his considerable properties were divided amongst the other soap-owning families. The ones that did not participate in the sale later lost almost all their shares. The Ṭbēle, Bustāmī and others did not make it into the new elite club, while the Nimrs, Ṭūqān and Bištāwī kept their status.²⁴ Nablus was always closely connected to its hinterlands. In fact, the rural *ṣuyūx an-nawāḥī* moved to the city and were integrated into the urban elite.²⁵

The trade relations between the factory owners and the peasants were long-standing. Those who had capital lent the money to peasants in exchange for next year's harvest in so-called *salām*-contracts. The olive oil, so valuable that it was also used to pay taxes, served as a security for the loans, which at times were high-interest credits.²⁶ As we have seen before and will also discuss below, such credits did not work in favour of the masses and they were contrary to Islamic law.

For an analysis of the class of factory owners, the concept of "notables" or "notable families" is employed. An influential 1969 article by Albert Hourani deals with the so-called "politics of notables" in the Ottoman empire, i.e. how the local elite shaped politics by having indirect access to power. "This type of politics seems to arise when certain conditions exist: first, when society is ordered according to relations of personal dependence - the artisan in the city producing mainly for patrician patrons, and the peasant in the countryside, whether nominally free or not, also producing mainly for a landowner, either because he cannot otherwise finance himself or because the landowner holds the key to the urban market; secondly, when society is dominated by *urban* notables, by great families who [...] reside mainly in the city, draw their main strength from there and *because* of their position in the city are able to dominate also a rural hinterland; and thirdly, when these notables have some freedom of political action."²⁷

The first criteria we have seen fulfilled in the previous chapter: soap production during the Ottoman period and after relied on hierarchical relationships between those who depended on buyers of their agricultural produce and on employers to give them work on one hand, and the factory owners on the other, cemented by the factory serving as a credit institution. "The hierarchy in the factory was pyramid-shaped: peasants and unskilled workers were the foundation, then came semi-skilled and skilled workers along with small-time buyers and sellers, and on top were the merchants who commissioned large batches of soap and the factory owners. The semi-skilled and skilled worker's privileges depended on their ties with the layer above, and some families were able to monopolize certain stages of the production process for them."²⁸

The second is fulfilled by the families we have also mentioned already, such as the

²³ West Bank town renovates ancient palaces belonging to prominent family 18.03.2021.

²⁴ Doumani 1995, 206f.

²⁵ Taraki et al. 2006, p. 13.

²⁶ Doumani 1995, p. 184.

²⁷ Hourani 1969, p. 45.

²⁸ Doumani 1995, 197f.

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Ṭūqān, Nimr and ʿAbd el-Hādī. Jabal Nablus had several local strongholds, the city of Nablus being only one of them. The Ġarrār family, for example, originally had a rural stronghold.²⁹ Over time, however, power concentrated in the cities, as did land ownership. By the 20th century, "there were two types of large landowners [...]. First, there was the absentee landlord who had little or no control over the labour process and, secondly, there were local village 'notables' who usually tried to retain some contact with the process of production but were increasingly being drawn to the new opportunities and status of life in the large towns."³⁰

Thirdly, Nablus seems to always have been relatively autonomous. When the Ottoman *mutasallim* of Jenin, Šēx Yūsif Ġarrār, wrote a poem to call for the notables of Nablus to help against the French forces under Napoleon who besieged Acre in 1799, he pleaded with the "Touqan, Nimr, Rayyan, Qasim, Jayyusi, At'ut, Hajj Muhammad, Ghazi, Jaradat, and Abd al Hadi families"³¹, appealing to their duty to protect Islam and women and their pride as Nabulsis. Interestingly, he does not mention a duty to protect the Ottoman empire. Even then, Nablus had a reputation as being difficult to rule. Thus, the third criteria is fulfilled: Nablus' "natural leaders"³² had social prestige as well as access to the central government in Istanbul, from where they got their legitimation for holding power. They were by no means opposed to Ottoman rule in general, but their primary concern was that of local power and of protecting Jabal Nablus, a world view developed over generations of relative autonomy. Doumani writes: "As Shaykh Yusuf's poem indicates, Jabal Nablus had a cohesive economic, social, and cultural identity which claimed the loyalties of its inhabitants in the face of external threats."³³

Notables in Hourani's sense of the word find themselves in a delicate position: They must not be merely tools of the greater authority, or they lose the support of the people they represent, nor must they appear hostile towards the authority. This ensures some kind of power balance: the leader in such a system is always bound to disappoint some of their allies, who leave his faction for another, and the same happens as soon as someone else is in power.³⁴ Several notable families thrived alongside each other in Nablus. Their social prestige derived from them being religious leaders or successful businesspeople.

In soap production, the patronage relationship and family control over certain domains of the factory work meant that problems and tensions had to be dealt with in "the informal arena of custom, precedent and solidarity" rather than in court. It is important to note, however, that by the mandate period the familial control had diminished and the factory owners preferred to import workers from Egypt rather than dealing with strikes and demands for higher wages.³⁵

Even though wealth tended to accumulate in the hands of a few, there was considerable difference between absentee landlordism and the "feudalism" practiced in the hill areas

²⁹Doumani 1995, p. 39.

³⁰Graham-Brown 1982, p. 114.

³¹Doumani 1995, p. 17.

³²Hourani 1969, p. 44.

³³Doumani 1995, p. 19.

³⁴Hourani 1969, p. 46.

³⁵Doumani 1995, p. 201.

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around Nablus. Since notables lived close to the villages from which they derived their income, and since sometimes they were even based in the villages, their "political as well as economic power and status depended very much on the maintenance of [patronage] relationships." Even when these families gave up their direct involvement with agriculture and moved to the city, their association with the rural areas persisted."³⁶

From after the Second World War, notable families increasingly shifted their interest from politics to economic endeavours, in line with a general shift of political activism from the notables towards other strata of society. "[...] Families with a rich political past were now deeply involved in the business of making money. Such was the case with the Abd al-Hadis, who began cultivating seedlings successfully in the 1960s. They were represented in the local cadres of mayors, members of parliament,³⁷ and others who helped prop up Hashemite rule in the West Bank. They were, however, no longer involved in Palestinian political life, which was centred on the refugee camps [...]."³⁸

At this point, we see a clear gap emerging between the realm of local politics and that of national politics. "Although a very few members of the traditional notable families remained politically active in the years that followed [1948], none of them has since played a prominent leadership role in Palestinian politics."³⁹ The retreat of notable families from political life is entirely untrue for Nabulsi politics. Locally, a "good name" and a long-standing relationship with the city count for a lot. If we look at the list of mayors of Nablus after 1948, we find members of the Tūqān, Šakfa, Mašrī, Kanaṣān and ʿAbd el-Hādī families. All of those families are among the traditionally known "good families" of Nablus, and all of them also used to be involved in soap production. Even though notables joined the national political ranks from time to time, generally speaking, they became more concerned with business.⁴⁰

In the 1930s, concentration of trade in the hands of very few families is evidenced by the composition of the Executive Council of the Nablus Chamber of Commerce. Its four members were from the in-Nābulsi, il-Mašrī, Tamīni and ʿArafāt families. The Tūqān, ʿAbd il-Hādī and Nimr families also traded in soap and other goods.⁴¹

To this day, some of the family names that are repeated in histories of Nablus reappear throughout the interviews I conducted, among them the ones mentioned above. For example, Doumani reports that "[o]ver the course of the eighteenth century, the Nimrs and Tuqans traded positions of leadership in the city of Nablus and occasionally ruled other regions in Palestine, especially Jerusalem and Jaffa (including Lydda and Ramla)."⁴² He further stresses the long duration of the Nimr's prominent status: "The Nimrs, who controlled several villages around Nablus, were first sipahis, military officers with a right to the overproduce, then tax collectors or *multazims*, and then businessmen who relied

³⁶Graham-Brown 1982, p. 142.

³⁷The Jordanian parliament, where West and East Bank citizens were represented with 30 seats each, first elected in 1950 and suspended in 1967.

³⁸Pappé 2006, p. 153.

³⁹Khalidi 2010, p. 22.

⁴⁰Pappé 2006, p. 153.

⁴¹Graham-Brown 1982, p. 142.

⁴²Doumani 1995, p. 39.

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on old ties but could no longer enforce them politically."⁴³

In the 1970s and 1980s, the traditional hegemony suffered as the new nationalist leaders, who did not come from their ranks, gained popularity. Nonetheless, "[...] Nablus continues to be viewed as a unique city, with an *esprit de corps* for which the local elite has set the tone. It is unfortunate that we do not have any comprehensive histories of the leading families of Nablus. An investigation would likely reveal a great continuity over the generation of leadership roles[...]"⁴⁴

One example of such continuity is the current mayor of Nablus, Adly Yaish. He is respected by Nabulsi for being polite, accommodating and always ready to help. He ran for office backed by Ḥamās in 2005, but backed by Fataḥ in 2016, despite allegedly being closer affiliated with Ḥamās.⁴⁵ This goes to show that for citizens of Nablus, the person and their long-established trustworthiness are more important than their political affiliation.

Hourani's theory has been used very widely to explain social dynamics in the Middle East, from the Ottoman empire to the emergence of nationalism. Nevertheless, it has also been met with criticism. In his 2006 treatment "The 'Politics of Notables' Forty Years After", Gelvin says: "The embrace of new methodologies and sources by historians of the Arab Middle East has already led to a critical reassessment of at least two issues seemingly resolved by the notables paradigm: the impact of Ottoman rule on the social history of the Arab provinces and, as it is usually phrased, the origins of Arab nationalism." He especially criticises the "seeming continuity" of patronage systems" that "masks more profound social and economic discontinuities".⁴⁶

Nonetheless, I argue that the "notables paradigm" is useful where the discontinuities are obvious and rather self-explanatory, but the continuities are, against all odds, also striking. It is important to concede that "local elites did not spring fully-formed from indigenous society"⁴⁷, as the reading of Hourani might suggest, and that each time and situation has formed its own parameters for who is considered part of the elite. Palestinian life has been uprooted many times, and yet some names re-appear throughout Palestinian history. As Beshara Doumani's observation of merchants becoming part of the ruling class discussed below shows, elites are very durable. Social and economic power seem to be particularly intertwined in Palestine, and in absence of a functioning government, economic power and social power are more important than political office.

These patterns can be viewed as the foundation on which Nabulsi society is built on to this day, even if the situation people find themselves in has changed fundamentally since the rise of those notables.⁴⁸ Even though certainly many families that used to control the fate of Nablus have disappeared into the darkness of history, others managed to prevail. What is more, there is a tendency to connect the recent history of Nablus to earlier periods, thus establishing a sense of continuity that serves the firm anchorage of Nabulsi

⁴³Doumani 1995, p. 193.

⁴⁴Taraki et al. 2006, p. 15.

⁴⁵*Nablus' Kingmaker* 27.01.2021.

⁴⁶Gelvin 2006, 24f.

⁴⁷Gelvin 2006, p. 26.

⁴⁸Both continuity and changes are evident in the interviews I conducted.

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presence in Nablus, connected to the anchorage of Palestinian presence in Palestine, a recurring theme in Palestinian heritage discourse.

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History is always dependent on perspective. Ilan Pappé in the introduction of his book on the history of Israel and Palestine tells an anecdote of letting his students, both Arabs and Jews, look outside the window in Haifa. The former see a once-flourishing Arab city that was destroyed and emptied, the latter see a flourishing city that was built where prior to this there was only emptiness and destruction.¹

Counterbalancing convenient narratives with facts is essential for clearing the nebulous image of Palestine in its historical context. It is what many historians and archeologists have set out to do, especially the "new historians" who strive to provide a more complete and less one-sided history of Israel, as well as Palestinian and international scholars. However, stories outweigh history regarding their ability to create facts on the ground and to justify political action and legitimise leadership. Politically, narratives are more powerful than facts. Bashir and Goldberg cite Anaheed al-Hardan as observing "That the nakbah became plausible in English only after it was articulated by the Israeli 'new historians,' whose 'new' scholarship was merely articulating what Arab intellectuals, historians, and political leaders and activists had taken up since 1948, sheds light on a constellation of colonial power relations."² This illustrates the dilemma inherent to the discourse on Palestine: Those who have a story to tell are not necessarily those being heard. Instead, all contributions to Palestinian history are underpinned by various agendas. The importance and also the misuse of historiography is described by Reinkowski as "historiografische[s] Ringen um die Legitimation der jüdisch-zionistischen beziehungsweise arabischen Ansprüche auf Palästina[...]."³

6.1. From event to narrative

Historical research on Palestine has always been complicated. There is no stable situation ensuring the continuity needed for long-term scholarly research, no state archives and in addition to that, all historiography suffers from history being written by the victorious in conflicts, and it tends to focus on written documents rather than the history of the illiterate. This has further clouded the material available on Palestine.⁴ However, this gap has been recognised and is being filled by many excellent Palestinian, Arab, Israeli and other historians such as Khalidi, Doumani, Pappé, as well as scholars in other fields such as Taraki, Tamari and Kamal, who deal with more recent phenomena in Palestine. Undoubtedly, many works employing dubious methods still have a great impact on popular

¹Pappé 2006, p. 1.

²Bashir et al. 2018, 14f.

³Reinkowski 1995, p. 47.

⁴Khalidi 2010, 89f.

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discourse, in particular the idea that the Palestinians were not dispossessed or evicted systematically in the process of Zionism and the 1948 war, "because the 'Palestinians' did not exist in the commonly accepted sense of the word."⁵

This is disregarding native sources, and denying the Palestinian people their history. Since they are nonexistent, not taking their stories into account is only logical. "In the words of Edward Said, for such writers the Palestinian do not have 'permission to narrate.' "⁶ As shown throughout this thesis, the nonexistence of a nation state was never tantamount to the nonexistence of a people. Pappé argues that "[t]he violent symbolic and real exclusion of people from the hegemonic narrative of the past is the source of the violence of the present."⁷

Modern historians are concerned with writing an inclusive history that does not neglect the poor in favour of the elites that naturally produced a richer written heritage and had more influence on what is commonly called "heritage". This may sometimes have led to an over-emphasis on the peasant nature of Palestine. Sayigh even states: "Palestinians [...] were peasants until 1948, then became refugees, and [...] re-emerged after 1967 as militants and revolutionaries." This narrative severely threatens the notion of Palestinians before 1948 being intellectuals, merchants, businessmen and businesswomen and having alongside the peasant population also formed urban societies, as we have seen in previous chapters, and reduces them to mere innocent victims without status and agenda, when the actual situation on the ground has always been a lot more complex. Arguably, it does the Palestinians no good to be categorised as either victims, heroes, or terrorists. It deprives them of their being human for the sake of their being a concept. Sayigh identifies history as being more receptive of the more prestigious, who were of course the urban elite, and largely ignoring the voices of a society that was, in fact, predominantly peasant. However, a society capable of producing such an elite, that is not only defined by having money, but also by having social influence and education, is not a society that is per se "peasant".

As early as 1912, we see complaints about a lack of native historiography: prominent Jerusalem newspaper editor Sa'īd Jarallah laments that even though a good deal had been written on Palestine by Western scholars and translated to Arabic, original Arabic material was scarce and needed urgently, as decent historiography would bring forward civilisation. This was, of course, done with a patriotic purpose.⁸

Pan-arab and Arab nationalist historiography has often neglected the Islamic and Ottoman history of Palestine in favour of its Arab ties, and re-written history in an "Arabised" manner, while Israeli historiography has focused "obsessively"⁹ on a Jewish presence in Palestine, despite the majority of the population being non-Jewish for millenia.¹⁰

"Nationalist historiographers do not differentiate between land and nation; these are the

⁵Khalidi 2010, p. 92.

⁶Khalidi 2010, p. 92.

⁷Pappé 2006, p. xx.

⁸Khalidi 2010, p. 45.

⁹Khalidi 2010, p. 33.

¹⁰Khalidi 2010, p. 33.

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same and become an essence at the same historical time."¹¹ But the people do differentiate: "Feeding a family, staying on the family land or attempting to make a new life on foreign soil can be portrayed as patriotism or nationalism: for most people it is an existentialist and survivalist act."¹² Pappé moreover argues for a differentiated look at history that takes the different experiences of different groups into account. "The nationalist notables and the Zionist leaders had one thing in common: they made and wrote their own history. They constructed a narrative of the people of Palestine that fitted the agendas of their respective elites. The power of these two contradictory views became increasingly evident between 1882 and the 1948 war, and they still dominate historiographical narratives in Israel and the Palestinian communities. On the political level, each day brought political drama, which mostly affected a small number of people but were written into history as collective calamities or victories."¹³

And, to cite a longer paragraph by Doumani, who similarly complains that some areas of Palestinian history are neglected: "Generally speaking, most Arab nationalists view the entire Ottoman era as a period of oppressive Turkish rule which stifled Arab culture and socioeconomic development and paved the way for European colonial control and the Zionist takeover of Palestine. Similarly, many Zionist historians represent Ottoman Palestine before European Jewish immigration as an economically devastated, politically chaotic, and sparsely populated region. The intellectual foundation for this shared image can be traced to the extensive literature published during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Westerners bent on "discovering," hence reclaiming, the Holy Land from what they believed was a stagnant and declining Ottoman Empire. This literature detailed the landscape in excruciating detail but turned a blind eye to the native inhabitants who, at best, were portrayed as nostalgic icons of Biblical times or, at worst, as obstacles to modernization. Even Islamicist historians, who argue for a golden age of Islamic justice shattered by Western intervention in the nineteenth century, invoke the same dichotomy, which effectively partitions the history of Ottoman Palestine into two disconnected stages: traditional and modern. The perception of discontinuity was so powerful that, as of this writing, only two monographs that deal specifically with Palestine during the eighteenth century have been published in English, and none covers the seventeenth century. One wonders how it is possible to understand the social structure, cultural life, and economic development of Palestinian society during the Mandate period (1922-1948) on the basis of such scanty knowledge about the preceding four hundred years."¹⁴

The Islamicist historians Doumani alludes to, or "Islamic-revisionist literature" became popular during the 1970s and 1980s. The Islamic *Umma* takes the place of the secular nation, or rather integrates the nation into the *Umma*. The Ottoman empire is viewed more positively, while Zionism becomes not only the enemy of the Palestinians, but a threat to Islam.¹⁵ Decidedly "Islamic" historiography is prone to anti-semitic sentiment

¹¹Pappé 2006, p. 7.

¹²Pappé 2006, p. 9.

¹³Pappé 2006, p. 90.

¹⁴Doumani 1995, 6f.

¹⁵Reinkowski 1995, 58ff.

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and at times riddled with conspiracy theory.¹⁶

While much research on Israel and Palestine has been coloured by the agendas of the persons who conducted it¹⁷, the field of scientific research that has perhaps most ruthlessly been exploited for nationalistic purposes is that of ancient history and archeology, not uncommonly glossed over with biblical references. "Zionism displayed a particular love for the cult of ancient history[...]"¹⁸

Palestinian narratives have reacted to this. "Both Israeli and Palestinian politicians claim the region of Israel and the Palestinian territories is the ancestral home of their people, and maintain that the other group was a late arrival." Palestinian politicians often claim present-day Palestinians are the direct descendants of Canaanite peasants who inhabited the Levant in the Bronze Age. A National Geographic article cites Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas saying "We are the Canaanites, [... t]his land is for its people who were here 5,000 years ago.", while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu states that the Israelites drove the Canaanites out of the land and fulfilled the biblical prophecy that they would live on this land, and that modern Palestinians were invaders from the Arabian peninsula. Genetic studies, however, recently found that both Arabs and Jews of the region are more than 50% "Canaanite", and that the Canaanites and Israelites, in supposed fierce opposition in the Bronze Age, were actually genetically and culturally very similar, making a gradual shift a lot more plausible than the supposed "driving out" of the Canaanites by the Israelites. The emergence of an Israelite culture was one of gradual transition and acquisition of new customs by the Canaanites rather than one of conquest, and the biblical report was written and dramatized long after it took place.^{19,20}

What is interesting about this are not only the findings in the field of genetics, but the strength the narrative gained. It might positively not make any difference to which Bronze Age tribe a present day person's ancestors belonged, anywhere but in Palestine, and of course, no actual right to a piece of land can be conclusively argued based on ancestry reaching back to that time. In an effort that is directed at an abstract, far-back history, an almost eternal time span is invoked. The Palestinian peasant figures prominently in this narrative. "Using the *fallah* as signifier of their intimate connection to a landscape, Palestinians stake out historical counter-claims as Israel makes the territory over"²¹, as Swedenburg puts it. The two motives employed by both the Israelis and the Palestinians are framing their presence as both *ancient* and *continous*, while denying the other such a presence.²²

But not only archeology is an area of contesting narratives politicising facts that might

¹⁶Reinkowski 1995, p. 117.

¹⁷On the Israeli side of the medal: "Die frühe zionistische und hebräischsprachige Geschichtsschreibung zeichnete sich durch eine innige Verschränkung von historischer Forschung und politischer Betätigung aus." Reinkowski 1995:pp.76-81.

¹⁸Kamrava 2016, p. 29.

¹⁹*DNA from the Bible's Canaanites lives on in modern Arabs and Jews* 27.01.2021

²⁰See also the study originally published in "Cell": [https://www.cell.com/cell/fulltext/S0092-8674\(20\)30487-6](https://www.cell.com/cell/fulltext/S0092-8674(20)30487-6)

²¹Swedenburg 1990, p. 22.

²²In line with this is the claim that the Arabs came from the Arabian peninsula, and therefore the Palestinians cannot be the original inhabitants of Palestine.

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be considered uncontroversial in other parts of the world. Place names are also contested. In Arabic language Israeli broadcasts, Jerusalem is referred to as Urshalim/al-Quds, shortened to Urshalim, a name derived from Hebrew, even though the city is commonly referred to as al-Quds aš-Šarīf in Arabic. Another example is the re-naming of the sites of former Arab villages after their inhabitants had been expelled. "In July 1949, Ben-Gurion personally supervised a large project to give 'Hebrew names to all the places, mountains, valleys, springs and roads, etc.' in the country. This act of 'memoricide' was completed in 1951."²³

Other examples of imposing cultural hegemony through place names are the Arabic village of Silwān, that has been renamed "The City of David" after a biblical place that is supposedly located there²⁴, and Nablus, which in Hebrew is to this day referred to as "Shechem", because of an erroneous association of Nablus with the ancient town of this name.²⁵ "This process of naming is an attempt to privilege one dimension of a complex reality at the expense of others [...]"²⁶ Many common Arabic names are used reluctantly as they have "Islamic overtones"²⁷

The Jewish and Palestinian national narratives, although very different in content, are similar in style: both have a catastrophe at their centre, and both tend to deny the validity of the other people's experience of crisis.

For the Jewish people, this crisis is the Holocaust (*shoah*), for the Palestinian people, it is the *nakba*.²⁸ The Israeli Knesset in 2011 passed a law that allowed the cutting of funding for Israeli organisations commemorating the *nakba*, and as we have seen above, the "empty land" trope aims at denying the Palestinian experience of expulsion. On the other hand, the catastrophic event of the *shoah* is downplayed in the Palestinian narrative, sometimes even denied and at other times seen as the historical event that ultimately caused Palestinian suffering instead of recognising it as the event that first and foremost caused Jewish suffering and shaped the Jewish experience.²⁹

In the Zionist narrative, opposition to Israel, even the opposition to Jewish settlers by Palestinians in Palestine during the mandate period, against the background of the *shoah* is immoral. What the Jewish people had to experience in this view justifies Zionism, and it justifies the establishment of a Jewish state where Jews will not be a minority.³⁰ There is, of course, no direct connection between the Palestinians and the *shoah*, but there is a direct connection between Israel and the *nakba*. Since these catastrophic events are the bedrock of the respective narratives, a total dissociation of the two narratives causes a dangerous dichotomy in which Jews and Arabs have nothing in common, making it difficult to empathise with the other.³¹ The core of both narratives is a claimed continuity

²³Pappé 2006, p. 146.

²⁴Khalidi 2010, 14f.

²⁵Encyclopædia Britannica: Nāblus 2020.

²⁶Khalidi 2010, p. 15.

²⁷Khalidi 2010, p. 16.

²⁸Both *nakba* and *shoah* roughly translate to "catastrophe".

²⁹Bashir et al. 2018, 2ff.

³⁰Bashir et al. 2018, p. 5.

³¹Bashir et al. 2018, p. 26.

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that simultaneously asserts the discontinuity of the other.³²

Doumani, whom we already know from previous chapters, also views his mammoth project on the history of Jabal Nablus in the light of the formation of the state of Israel and the often perpetrated story of the desert that was made to bloom by the Zionist settlers. He shows that it is untrue that what they found in Palestine was only void land, scarcely inhabited by nomads and scattered peasant villages: there were people with a sense of belonging to their land even when this sense of belonging was not directed towards a nonexistent nation state. Even though it is clearly refuted by population numbers that the Jewish settlers found the land empty, Theodor Herzl in his leading book for Zionist thought fails to even mention the Arabs.³³

European aggression and political agenda, although rightfully condemned by Arab historiographers, is often overvalued at the expense of internal divisions, both by Islamic historiographers and in the tradition of post-colonial studies. Shattering the Ottoman empire through European-style nationalisms was not a plot to deliberately infiltrate and destroy the enemy, and neither did European powers split the Islamic *Umma* nor the Pan-Arab utopia³⁴ but certain policies definitely made good use of the existing divisions in Palestinian society. This paranoid construction of an unrealistic and all-powerful enemy, a greater plot to destroy Islamic civilisation that has been put into action since the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and has led to all of the crusaders, European imperialism and Zionism and also carries with it the dangerous stereotype of the collaborator, who is often seen as a member of a religious or ethnic minority, still constitutes a very potent narrative. At times it is merged with obvious conspiracy theories about the freemasons, communists and others.³⁵

The selective reception of historical and historiographic material is not perceived as a shortcoming, but as a duty when political agenda guides the judgment. The respective own historiography is viewed as right and true. Therefore, the corpus perpetuates itself, selectively absorbing and leaving out sources and knowledge.³⁶³⁷

6.2. A nation without a state?

Palestine does not lack a dominant narrative of what constitutes the Palestinian identity any more than other countries. A nationalist ideology is well-established. This is despite the fact that there is no nation state³⁸ in which this ideology is rooted and at which it is directed. However, the disparity between the official narrative and the situation on the

³²Reinkowski 1995, 228f.

³³Khalidi 2010, p. 101.

³⁴Reinkowski 1995, 179f.

³⁵Reinkowski 1995, pp. 185–193.

³⁶Reinkowski 1995, 224f.

³⁷The contentious academic discussions outside of Israel/Palestine cannot be dealt with here. See for example Reinkowski 1995:84f. for a short and concise discussion.

³⁸For a detailed discussion of the terms state, nation and people regarding the Palestinians, see the "Introduction" chapter of Kamrava's "The impossibility of Palestine". For this thesis, I will take it there is a Palestinian nation, but not a Palestinian state.

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ground might be larger than elsewhere, and the disparities between the different identities people navigate might be greater.

Moreover, creating and maintaining a clear-cut Palestinian identity is far more charged with importance than is the case for central Europe³⁹. Palestinians "compensate" for their statelessness by "sustaining collective memories"⁴⁰. Overcoming all dividing factors to make up "Palestinianness" is the only basis on which one can possibly argue for a Palestinian state. Palestinian identity has been under constant threat to dissolve into greater identities (like an Arab or Islamic identity) on one hand, and to vanish into oblivion on the other. Contrary to my European experience, where large parts of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia have adopted post-national world views, Palestinians can hardly afford such luxury. Thus, the social strata concerned with nationalist issues are wildly different in the two contexts mentioned.

According to Khalidi, the study of Palestinian identity suffers from "[...] a tendency to see an essential Palestinian identity going well back in time, rather than the complex, contingent and relatively recent reality of Palestinian identity, and to stress factors of unity at the expense of those tending toward fragmentation or diversity in Palestinian society and politics", and from prioritising external factors over internal ones.⁴¹ This stress of unity that transcends all differences is arguably the product of a national identity that is, in fact, constantly under pressure, or at least constantly perceived to be under pressure.⁴²

In terms of prestige, there is the idolised peasant we will expand on in the section on folklore on one hand, and a great local pride in the city on the other. Despite emphasis on the unity of all Palestinians, people distinguish very precisely between foreigners to their city, newcomers, and the long-established members of their society. That means, the target of Palestinian identity is far from what actually constitutes identity in daily practice, or rather, conflicting targets of identity exist simultaneously.

In official nationalist discourse, there is a fundamental opposition between *qawmiyye*, "nationalism" in a very positive sense, and the negative *ʿiqḷmiyya*, "local patriotism". History is seen as culminating in the awakening of national consciousness, with "consciousness" or "awareness" as a central concept in nationalist thought.⁴³

Neglect of the diverse identities and loyalties that determine a person's daily practice is arguably a problem inherent in all nationalist views, but in the Palestinian context the conflict between a dominant narrative of Palestinianness and the fragmented reality is of vital importance. National identity is not only a convenience that enhances a sense of belonging and helps with ingroup-outgroup definitions. It is regarded as a necessity to ensure the Palestinians continue to exist as a people.

An important part of identity construction is that it relies on our relation to others. Palestinian identity is particularly often constructed in this manner: out of stories of loss,

³⁹Which is obviously the area where my personal experience is located and therefore the stance from which I speak.

⁴⁰Aboubakr [2017], p. 220.

⁴¹Khalidi [2010], p. 34.

⁴²Cf. Khalidi, Aboubakr and others.

⁴³Reinkowski [1995], p. 154.

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decline, migration and otherness, in contrast to the Israeli success story. Palestinians have a shared experience of being treated differently from others at airports and border crossings.⁴⁴ "The fact that all Palestinians are subject to these special indignities and thus are all subject to an almost unique postmodern condition of shared anxiety at the frontier, the checkpoint and the crossing point proves that they are a people, if nothing else does."⁴⁵ In the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations Mandate, they are referred to as "the non-Jewish communities in Palestine"⁴⁶, i.e. a definition *ex negativo*, even though the Muslim community was the biggest in numbers.

The Palestinian narrative is contested by the very powerful narrative of Israel. The latter has come to endorse political Zionism as a kind of determinist result of Jewish history. The Palestinian narrative on the other hand, is repeatedly threatened. When Israeli prime minister Golda Meir said "There was no such thing as Palestinians... They did not exist.", she not only shaped popular discourse, but also expressed a view that had been widely held and still is to this day. But she was by far not the only one to deny the existence of a Palestinian entity. The Pan-Arab narrative as well as the Islamist narrative see all nation states as dividing the greater nation of Arabs or Muslims, respectively.⁴⁷

Omer Bartov in his chapter "National Narratives of Suffering and Victimhood" recalls: "I remember us calling out to Prime Minister Golda Meir when she visited my high school, Tichon Hadash, in 1972: 'What about the Palestinian people?' And I recall her answer, speaking in her distinctive American accent as an immigrant from Milwaukee born in Kiev: 'There is no Palestinian people. I am a Palestinian; I lived in Mandatory Palestine and have the ID to prove it.'" ⁴⁸

Golda Meir's statement has been widely cited, prompting her to publish a comment in 1976, stating that she was indeed expressing popular opinion at the time: both for Pan-Arab nationalists and Zionists, the Palestinians were not a people, but part of a larger Arab community.⁴⁹⁵⁰

Reinkowski sees three main causes for early Arab nationalism: opposition to European influence, opposition to the Young Turk's policies of centralisation and Turkification and opposition to Zionism.⁵¹ It would be ignorant, however, to assume that Palestinian identity developed only as a response to external factors. It is rather part of a universal process that can be seen in numerous countries of the Middle East after WWI to develop a national consciousness, spinning existing loyalties into new ones. While parochial and local identities go much further back than a shared Palestinian identity, they are the "bedrock" on which a national identity is built.⁵² "The majority of Arab historians holds [...] the view that Palestinian identity was in place already in the mid-19th century, and through the threat of Zionism it was transformed into national consciousness and

⁴⁴Khalidi 2010, 3ff.

⁴⁵Khalidi 2010, p. 5.

⁴⁶Khalidi 2010, 22f.

⁴⁷Khalidi 2010, 146ff.

⁴⁸Bashir et al. 2018, p. 201.

⁴⁹Golda Meir: *On the Palestinians* 31.01.2021.

⁵⁰G.M. states she did not mean to say the refugees in 1948 were nonexistent.

⁵¹Reinkowski 1995, p. 43.

⁵²Khalidi 2010, 20f.

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concretised into Palestinian nationalism.⁵³ (My translation.) This view can be adopted for the purposes of this thesis, as in a narrower sense, it distinguishes between identity and nationalism and therefore allows for a proto-nationalist identity while not denying the decisive impact of outside factors.

The Palestinian people "have consistently failed over the years to create for themselves a space where they are in full control or are fully sovereign."⁵⁴ Thus, the competing loyalties between familial, local, regional, political and religious affiliations that define most Middle Eastern identities are particularly evident in Palestinians. A Palestinian state would have to be "independent, sovereign, possessed of a contiguous territory, and economically viable"⁵⁵ to exhibit all traits of a nation state. Israeli settlement building, backed by the USA, is still expanding⁵⁶, and the continued economic dependence of Palestine on Israeli produce is uninterrupted by efforts towards more self-sufficiency.⁵⁷ For the time being, a sovereign Palestinian state is not in sight.

"[...] being deprived of access to formal state power [during the mandate period] and afterward has affected the growth of Palestinian identity, and what took its place, whether in the form of traditional social structure dominated by the old notable families, or parastate formations like the PLO."⁵⁸

Kamrava distinguishes between the process of "state-building", meaning the establishment of structures and institutions of a state, and "nation-building", with social and cultural implications.⁵⁹ While Palestinians have been unsuccessful in the former, they have been quite successful in achieving the latter.

Despite "Palestinianness" as a common denominator, Palestinian society is actually very fragmented into lots of different sub-identities. While the fragmentation of Palestinian society was augmented first by British and later by Israeli politics⁶⁰, this is of course not the only factor dividing it. Class, region and religion were pre-existing breaking lines,⁶¹ despite class-consciousness being a marginal factor in Palestinian society for a long time. The efforts to overcome those divisions have been manifold. And while each of the contingent narratives claims exclusivity, "[a]ll of political Islam, Palestinian identity, pan-Arabism and modern Zionism are recent responses to recent situations, none of them are any more ancient or genuine than the others." (Khalidi 2010:xxiii)

Despite inner fragmentation, a national consciousness unites all Palestinians under one aegis. Nations are a construct. Khalidi cites Hobsbawm: "no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist. Nationalism requires

⁵³Reinkowski 1995, p. 145.

⁵⁴Khalidi 2010, p. 10.

⁵⁵Khalidi 2010, p. xxi.

⁵⁶Galbraith 2020.

⁵⁷*Economic costs of the Israeli occupation for the Palestinian people* 31.01.2021.

⁵⁸Khalidi 2010, p. 21.

⁵⁹Kamrava 2016, 1ff.

⁶⁰During the mandate period, the British understood the population of Palestine as primarily divided along religious lines, see for example Haiduc-Dale 2013. Later, the Israeli government treated the Druze and Samaritan minorities differently from the rest of the Palestinians, which helped keep divisions in place. This is evident in the Druze serving in the IDF, for example, or see Pappé p.169.

⁶¹Khalidi 2010, p. 24.

too much belief in what is patently not true." While this is certainly an important notion, the consequences that nations and nationalism have on the ground are very real. A Palestinian is no Israeli, and the reality of a Palestinian's life is very different from that of another nation's citizen. The trauma of their past is different, and if they live in the Palestinian territories, their everyday life is subject to numerous restrictions and complications imposed on them by Israel. Moreover, the concept of nationalism shapes social relations and identity. Gellner, cited by Khalidi, states that nations are a construct, but nationalism is very real.⁶²

The "national" identity is seen as "grouped together under the umbrella of the PLO", a secular nationalist identity, focussing primarily on the uniquely *Palestinian* aspects of identity, not denying the Arab, Muslim, local, familial etc. affiliations but putting them in the background. Even though it is anachronistic to assume this manifestation of a Palestinian identity goes far back in time, it has been equipped with a narrative that suggests exactly that.⁶³ In contrast, Pan-Arab and religious narratives have been more reluctant to acknowledge a uniquely Palestinian experience.

Arguably, nationalism has unique implications in Palestine. The Palestinian nation is a reference point that is exceptionally strong, and it is always connected to a narrative of struggle. Most social movements in Palestine refer back to a struggle for national liberation as a primary goal. If we look, for example, at the 2019 Palestinian feminist movement "Tal3at" (*tālṣāt*), sparked by the killing of several Palestinian women by their families under the pretense of "honour", we find that their slogan is *waṭan ḥurr, nisāʾ ḥurra*, "free homeland, free women", a connection unthinkable in this context in Europe, especially considering the leftist political aesthetics and symbolism employed by the movement.⁶⁴ This suggests that criticism of the Palestinian society from within Palestine has to be tied to the agenda of national liberation to be legitimised. In the case of Tal3at, a popular grassroots movement in which primarily young, educated women were the faces of the movement, they firmly tied their demands for a more just society for women to the demands for a more just society for women and men, which could only be brought about through achieving nationalist goals. In doing so, they not only acknowledged the outside pressure men are subject⁶⁵ to that hampers social development and might cause the Palestinian society to rely on traditional patriarchal structures. They also pre-empted criticism of attacking and dividing Palestinian society by taking up the cause of national liberation.

6.3. Culture, heritage, folklore

Traditions are invented, often for nationalistic purposes.⁶⁶ Even where they are not invented, the fact that they are traditions and not mere habits is invented. The fact that soap is a symbol and not merely a useful thing, is invented, which does not make it any

⁶²Khalidi 2010, p. xii.

⁶³Khalidi 2010, 148f.

⁶⁴Tal3at 12.03.2021.

⁶⁵Women, on the other hand, are doubly oppressed: as Palestinians and as women.

⁶⁶Khalidi 2010, p. xii.

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less true. Ideologies can use customs and things, turn them into traditions and heritage and give them the desired connotations: "Die Nationalismen nehmen vorher existierende, vererbte Formen von Kulturerbe auf, verwenden sie jedoch äußerst selektiv und verändern sie meist dramatisch."⁶⁷

Hegemony over the discourse on culture means hegemony over the discourse on identity: "Performed repeatedly in everyday practice, signs of the nation (songs, dialect, food, fashion, religious piety, topography, etc.) and signs of political affiliation (flags, images of political leaders, emblems, uniforms, etc.) became linked, creating a perceived 'fit' or coherence between what it means to be Palestinian and who best represents Palestinian interests."⁶⁸

The engagement with folklore is not new. American archeologist and biblical scholar William F. Albright in 1921 wrote: "Owing to the unprecedented rapidity of the economic and social evolution of Palestine today, where all races vie with one another in modernizing culture and beliefs, the thorough study of the folklore of Palestine is a matter of imperative necessity. Every year interesting and significant details pass into oblivion, and it is rare indeed to find a young peasant who knows much; in one village we were told, 'The old men think so and so, but we boys don't think so.' The importance of these studies for understanding the mind of the Palestinian peasant, in many respects no doubt like his Israelite and Canaanite predecessors, can hardly be overestimated."⁶⁹

Between 1936 and 1948, there was a weekly radio program on Palestinian folklore by the British Palestine Broadcast Service.⁷⁰ Already during the Mandate period, the Palestinian peasant was described as an endangered species, living life the same way they always had since biblical times. This was, of course, not a self-description by Palestinian peasants, but rather what was ascribed to them by a circle of native Jerusalem intellectuals, centered around folklorist Tawfiq Canaan, who set out to preserve their customs, material culture and way of life.⁷¹ These folklorists themselves belonged to an urban elite, and are sometimes described as "nativist orientalists".

Whereas before 1948, all things peasant generally played a marginal role, they played an increasingly important role in popular culture thereafter, at the expense of urban culture. As a new political practice emerged that concentrated on the new agents, which were characterised by their involvement in the national liberation discourse rather than by being part of the urban establishment, the focus of popular culture shifted as well. Folkloristic dance and music as well as embroidery were sponsored and encouraged. "In response to the Israeli state's radical, material denial of their existence, Palestinian poets, mainly affiliated with the Israeli Communist Party, concocted an array of symbols - the *fallah*, the kufiya (Palestinian headcovering), the olive tree, the embroidered dress, the orange tree, and za'atar (wild thyme) - connected with a rural way of life." This is often framed as "preservation" of national heritage, when really, a craft is only elevated to the status of heritage by a deliberate decision to regard it as heritage.

⁶⁷Reinkowski 1995, p. 209.

⁶⁸McDonald 2013, p. 126.

⁶⁹Albright 1921, p. 4.

⁷⁰Yaqub 2007, p. 64.

⁷¹Bontemps 2012, p. 282.

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Swedenburg1990

Folklorists were there to provide a narrative of shared ancestry and heritage for all Palestinians, "where national identity was either denied or undermined by the Zionist project."⁷² Idolisation of peasantry is not an uncommon theme for nationalist discourse on heritage. Nationalisms often praise the peasant, but are invented by city-dwellers and develop to produce more city-dwellers. An exception is the nationalist ideology of Zionism, that actually succeeded in bringing educated city people to rural areas where they cultivated land.⁷³

This folklorist movement was revived in the 1970s and 1980s in the national liberation movement. This was achieved through the quasi-state institutions of the PLO in exile. "Providing an institutional framework for the production of a body of knowledge and a shared collective memory, the establishment of research institutions in Lebanon, such as the Palestine Research Center, facilitated the emergence of a corpus of historical works that began to delineate a coherent Palestinian national narrative."⁷⁴

The peasant stayed (as they have in part ever since) at the heart of this "authorized discourse" on what was and was not Palestinian heritage, mostly the work done by women domestically, such as small-scale soap production, but not the industrial soap-production in Nablus.

We would fall short of reality if we were to assume that the engagement with a peasant lifestyle and its inclusion and in fact dominance of the heritage discourse was solely imposed upon Palestinians without their active participation in and transformation of the narrative. "As middle- class, educated, urban youth were exposed to, and began to participate in, rural cultural practices, values shifted. Notions of what it meant to be Palestinian were reframed, bringing together diverse urban and rural communities under a shared banner of resistance and enabling a more open and collaborative framework for political action to emerge."⁷⁵

The Oslo process sparked yet another wave of interest in folklore. The PA was keen on establishing a nation state, hence the flags and mausoleums.⁷⁶ "Prior to Oslo, the reigning nationalist orthodoxy downplayed social disparities, denounced the flaunting of wealth and privilege, and discouraged a culture of "normalcy" in the face of occupation and repression. This was especially the case during the first intifada, when expressions of frivolity were discouraged (if not banned), and an ascetic culture of resistance informed by peasant or imagined peasant values was hegemonic."⁷⁷

"The tension between new and orthodox sensibilities can be discerned in the attitude toward folklore. In the hegemonic nationalist ethos, 'folklore' is sacrosanct, and much of the cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s glorified peasant values, leading a Palestinian cultural critic — not surprisingly a returnee — to lament the 'adoration

⁷²Bontemps 2012, p. 282.

⁷³Reinkowski 1995, p. 214.

⁷⁴DeCesari 2019, p. 40.

⁷⁵McDonald 2013, p. 130.

⁷⁶Bontemps 2012, p. 283.

⁷⁷Taraki 2008, p. 16.

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of folklore' in Palestinian national discourse.⁷⁸ This "peasant ethos", however, was not representative of reality. Indeed, "the majority of Palestinians did not live in a peasant economy or have a peasant lifestyle" at the time of the two intifādas.⁷⁹

Swedenburg states: "The imaginary *fallah* unifies Palestinians by cutting across differences based on class, sect, region and kinship."⁸⁰ He continues that "the *kūfiyye* donned by Arafat, formerly a peasant and Bedouin headscarf, made him a "man of the people.", adding that "[...] nationalist historiography mythologizes the peasantry as heroic, self-sacrificing and always prepared to do battle."⁸¹

It is, of course, a polished image of the peasant that is worshipped. Rural society is portrayed as egalitarian, and the money-lender, share-cropper, or "traitor" who sold land to the Zionists is wholly absent from this narrative, as is the agricultural worker.⁸² The idyllic image of pre-1948 peasantry turns "the Palestinian peasant into a national signifier (Swedenburg) and hence peasantry into a national discourse on Palestinian cultural memory."⁸³

Yet the peasants could never be the subjects of history, because they lacked political awareness. While they were the ones who brought forward the more militant approach in rejecting colonialism, they were unfit to fill the position of leadership.⁸⁴ Thus, the peasant ideal also serves to keep the people aware of their place and keep them quiet and obedient. By putting the national struggle above all disparities and all internal struggles, it helps cover up disparities and crucial issues are never addressed.

The refugees of 1948 that were also peasants are doubly marginalized: as peasants they are unable to find good work and move out of the camps. They kept carrying with them the stigma of peasantry and added to it the stigma of being refugees.⁸⁵ All the while, the poor infrastructure in the camps perpetuates their living at the margins of society and might have vice versa increased the stigma placed on peasants. Somewhat contradictory to that, "sacrifice, steadfastness, faith — all the traditional peasant virtues — are still needed as the moral basis of struggle."⁸⁶

Folklore emphasises the importance of land and establishes the connection between land and resistance. Aboubakr states that folktales are "literary nationalism, because rural oral literature is related to the significance of the land and peasants' direct contact with an agricultural way of life." Land has a "strong symbolic relation to Palestinian identity and resistance".⁸⁷ Other narratives than that of the peasant society have emerged "timidly only in recent years"⁸⁸, and have not replaced the dominant narrative.

Focussing on folklore in its extreme forms is essentially an orientalist project. It leaves

⁷⁸Taraki 2008, p. 17.

⁷⁹Taraki et al. 2006, p. 1.

⁸⁰Swedenburg 1990, p. 24.

⁸¹Swedenburg 1990, p. 26.

⁸²Swedenburg 1990, p. 25.

⁸³Aboubakr 2017, p. 218.

⁸⁴Swedenburg 1990, 26f.

⁸⁵Sayigh 2007, p. xxv.

⁸⁶Sayigh 2007, p. 5.

⁸⁷Aboubakr 2017, p. 221.

⁸⁸DeCesari 2019, p. 41.

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modernity and rationalism to the "other" and lets the Palestinian stay an uneducated peasant uninterested in progress. Favouring rural over urban development while at the same time keeping the power balance very clear, has led to a stagnant and vulnerable economy that is apt to keep society stagnant and vulnerable, were it not for some who deliberately refuse to adapt to stagnation. The idealisation of peasantry over intellectual progress in urban (and rural) centres reinforces the trope of a stagnant and backward Palestinian society, strongly refuted by urban progressive forces, which risk losing touch with their base. On the other hand, it is important to note that folklore is not only embraced by reactionary forces in Palestine, but also by the general public and even intellectuals. While a certain discomfort in adopting all forms of folklore as their own could be ascertained among my interviewees, there is no general rejection of it. On the contrary, most happily and proudly spoke about folkloristic practices, and even those who were sceptical about certain inner contradictions in the use of, for example, the embroidered Palestinian dress, were not opposed to its use or sceptical of its place in Palestinian heritage.

The rifts that run through Palestinian society are many, and one of them is a strong urban-rural dichotomy. This finally leads us back to Nabulsi soap, which as an element of heritage is situated precisely where different identities or partial identities intersect. Soap is "a material expression of heritage"⁸⁹. What kind of heritage this is supposed to be, needs further elaboration on two levels, the local and the national.

At the local level, soap-making was always the symbol of an old-established urban bourgeoisie. "Indeed, the primary meaning of Nâbulî soap heritage is related to family honour: for important families in Nablus, soap factories are first and foremost linked to familial heritage, as a marker of their long-established urban identity."⁹⁰ In fact, Bontemps cites multiple interviews she conducted where her interviewees state they keep their soap factories not for economic, but symbolic reasons.⁹¹

The inscription of soap into the local heritage has two sides. "The paradox is indeed that while the preservation of heritage is one of the reasons for the survival of Nâbulî soap factories, it is, at the same time, the reason for their decline. For the Tûqân, Shaka'a and Masrî families, the preservation of familial heritage relies on affective ties and a strong feeling of belonging to their city, but they are not willing to invest and modernize the soap factories, or to promote their heritage. They keep the factory open without trying to make it economically viable and sustainable."⁹²

The problem with modernisation is that there is no domestic market for a re-branded kind of Nabulsi soap. Not only the manufacturers, but also the buyers value the soap for affective and nostalgic reasons. "They often fix Nâbulî soap as an 'object of the past', which sometimes contradicts their practices of a product of everyday use."⁹³ This encompasses the imagined use as well as the imagined production process of soap. As we have seen, soap production is associated with a lengthy process of manual labour, and

⁸⁹Bontemps 2012, p. 279.

⁹⁰Bontemps 2012, p. 284.

⁹¹Bontemps 2012, p. 285.

⁹²Bontemps 2012, p. 285.

⁹³Bontemps 2012, p. 287.

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this imagery is perpetrated in representations and advertisements. As for the use of soap, it is often associated with childhood memories.

"Through these representations, the soap (as an object) and the industry itself often disappear behind what they 'represent': the sacred dimension of the olive tree, the memory of a flourishing city." The olive oil connects the soap to Nablus as a locality, but also to a "sacred tradition, as olive trees and olive oil are mentioned in the Quran."⁹⁴

At the national level, soap never played a major role in the heritage discourse until the 2000s. Bontemps writes: "Il est vrai que la structure familiale des entreprises ne contribue pas à les faire entrer dans des mythes légitimateurs nationaux."⁹⁵ In 2002, "according to the UNESCO, hundreds of buildings were affected [by the Israeli invasion], and some with "particular heritage significance" were severely damaged, including the Abd al-Hadi Palace, while others were completely destroyed."⁹⁶ Among them were two soap factory buildings. This awakened a new interest in soap, "thus inscribing it in the broader narrative of Palestinian heritage (*turāth*) where it had not figured prominently until then."⁹⁷ A sense of urgency for the preservation of soap factories and the knowledge about soap production emerged, or rather, it re-emerged. We have seen this impulse multiple times, from the mandate period to the *nakba* to the first and second intifāda, but this time, Nabulsi soap was part of what had to be preserved, not only for the sake of preserving family history, but for the sake of preserving a part of Palestinian identity.⁹⁸

Palestinian heritage is often (re-)invented in the context of conflict, as we have seen with the *kūfiyye*. We witness the same dynamic with soap: the meaning it carries in the local context is overshadowed by its recently acquired meaning of symbol of resistance. Bontemps argues this is not only an expression of tension, but also of the "multivocacy" of identity, where different narratives exist side by side⁹⁹, although she contends that including Nabulsi soap in the national heritage "comes to obscure its importance as an aspect of local, familial and urban heritage"¹⁰⁰ Nablus' reputation as being particularly resistant has certainly aided the inclusion of its famous soap into the heritage of a nation that to a large extent self-defines as a nation of freedom fighters.

Since it is difficult for soap producers to profit from the domestic market, they turn to exportation instead. Especially those who are re-shaping Nabulsi soap try to access an international group of buyers. Many of those are NGOs, and they buy the soap for two reasons: an interest in natural skin-care products and an interest in the Palestinian cause. Thus, the soap producers profit from their product becoming part of a narrative of "Palestinianness". This paradoxically "engenders representations to a large extent stereotyped for some groups of activists, who have a certain idea of Palestine as 'authentic' vs. an aggressive 'modernity' represented by Israel."¹⁰¹

⁹⁴Bontemps 2012, p. 288.

⁹⁵Bontemps 2009, p. 30.

⁹⁶Bleibleh 2012, p. 47.

⁹⁷Bontemps 2012, p. 281.

⁹⁸Bontemps 2012, p. 284.

⁹⁹Bontemps 2012, p. 280.

¹⁰⁰Bontemps 2012, p. 279.

¹⁰¹Bontemps 2012, p. 292.

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The "everyday heritage" on the other hand has little to do with the grandeur of the national discourse: carrying a piece of Nabulsi soap when travelling, giving one to friends from other countries, a small piece of local pride that is characterized by not melting easily and only producing foam on absolutely clean skin, a kind of metaphor for purity. Heritage is constructed (or selected) by a nation state or quasi-state, but it is important to see how local actors adopt or appropriate the official discourse on heritage.¹⁰²

¹⁰²Bontemps 2009, p. 29.

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Identity, and Palestinian identity in particular, is a complicated topic, particularly because assuming there is one "Palestinian identity" would not do the subject justice. For an excellent discussion of this, also reflecting on her earlier work on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, entitled "Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries"^[1], see Sayigh 2008, from which I quote: [...] Palestinian identity in the camps in the 1970s was far from being merely a unitarian label, but was more like a "home base" from which people created an anthology of identity metaphors out of individual and collective experiences. I doubt that such a collection was handed down ready-made from the leadership."^[2] The same is true for Palestinians in the West Bank. Even though the concept of identity has been much criticised, if heeding it explores this "home base" rather than how individual Palestinians define themselves, it remains useful for, and in fact at the core of this thesis.

7.1. Emerging nationalist sentiments

In the previous chapter, we have anticipated that a Palestinian national consciousness has evolved at some point, and have alluded to its implications for the present. In this chapter, we will take a closer look at the development of Palestinian nationalism in order to understand more about its connection to Palestinian identity.

The first notions of Palestine as a country (or, rather, "land") were certainly religious in nature. For all three of Muslims, Christians and Jews Palestine was a "Holy land", centred around, but not limited to Jerusalem.^[3]

By modern Arab nationalists, the Ottoman empire is mostly perceived as an occupying power that suppressed Arab culture. But this was not always the most wide-spread opinion. Only when the Ottoman authorities intervened on the side of the new land owners in the early conflict between Palestinian peasants and Jewish immigrants, they began to be seen as Turkish oppressors.^[4] This was, of course, also influenced by the pro-Turkish and anti-Arab tendencies that took over the Young Turk movement.^[5]

The negative image of the Ottoman empire is accompanied by a glorification of the classic Islamic period before the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols 1258, and Turkish "despotism" as the sole reason for the decline of the Arab world.^[6] Generally speaking, more glorious times tend to be located in a past that should be restored according to

¹Where the problematic, in my opinion, is evident in the title.

²Sayigh 2008.

³Khalidi 2010, p. 29.

⁴Khalidi 2010, p. 104.

⁵Pappé 2006, p. 57.

⁶Reinkowski 1995, p. 52.

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nationalist thought. Nostalgia for times past continues to play an important role in the face of constant political helplessness and humiliation.

The expulsion of peasants in the early stage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict played a decisive role both for political Zionism and for Anti-Zionism. It has shaped the conflict ever since and gave the Palestinian side a motive that was recurrent over the following decades.⁷ Nowadays, over a century later, it is still a strong and often-invoked narrative. The tragedy of the events lie in both parties perceiving their actions as legitimate: The pre-1948 settlers who bought the land, from their perspective, had every right to do with their legally acquired property what they pleased, while the peasants, from their perspective, had every right to remain on the land which their families had tilled for generations and which was theirs according to customary law (*ʿurf*). The legal owners who had sold the land were often not the ones who lived on it.

While violent resistance emerged among dispossessed peasants, the urban intelligentsia was generally not in favour of such radical action, despite large portions of the population being opposed to Zionism as an ideology. Being discontent with the Ottoman lack of protection for Palestinian land against this perceived threat, first movements that wished for self-determination emerged.⁸

Anti-Zionist sentiment was encouraged by the Arabist ideology that gained more and more followers among the urban elite in Palestine. The ever-growing *yishuv* and the coherent ideology that Zionism provided for it was naturally opposed to the pro-Arab views of this elite, which increasingly was in conflict with the Ottoman parliament and also used the alleged pro-Zionism of the Ottoman elite as propaganda for their own cause. The Ottoman empire was seen as Turkish-dominated and neglecting the Arab provinces in favour of the Zionist movement.⁹ Thus, resistance to Zionism was two-fold: the urban elites opposed it on ideological grounds, whereas the peasants opposed it on the very tangible grounds that they might lose their homes and livelihood in the aftermath of a land-sale.¹⁰

The urban-rural dichotomy was partly overcome by the new common opponent, and conscious efforts were made to include peasant resistance in the ideology of the elites. Some newspapers even targeted the people in the countryside specifically, for example by sending out free copies to the *muxtār* of every village with more than 100 inhabitants. Newspapers played a big role in forming a national consciousness and were available to a broader audience, even if illiterate, through the custom of reading out newspapers aloud in cafés and on the street.¹¹

At the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, progressive notables were in place, who were religiously associated with liberal *salafī* thought¹², but the Ottoman government thought more involvement with popular religion would serve them better and favoured

⁷Khalidi 2010, p. 110.

⁸Khalidi 2010, 141f.

⁹Khalidi 2010, p. 111.

¹⁰Khalidi 2010, p. 114.

¹¹Khalidi 2010, 56f.

¹²Although in present-day understanding, "salafī" and "liberal" do not go together well, at the time salafism was an Islamic reform movement.

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more conservative notables such as the Ḥusaynis. This trend continued during the British mandate.¹³

The Palestinian political landscape changed with the onset of the British mandate, where national rights for the Jewish but not the Arab population had been promised. Zionism was a major concern for Palestinian politicians. However, reference points such as religion, locality and family did not cease to play a role.¹⁴ "In the relatively autonomous spaces in which most people lived, religion and spiritualism were still much more common influences on life than were British officials or Zionist colonialists."¹⁵

The emergence of a national Palestinian identity was not straight-forward, and it was largely asynchronic and not merely a counter-identity to the Zionist one. The British mandate was also a space of coexistence. "It surfaced at times that nationalists considered mundane and unimportant, such as when natural disasters like earthquakes occurred (1926), and when businesses were declining at times of economic crisis or booming in times of prosperity. Such calamities or blessings engendered human responses that transcended national identities. In Palestine these joint responses occurred where people who lived with occupational hazards realized trade union options, shared anti-government sentiments, coped with bad harvests, or faced famine and epidemics. These, and many other, circumstances led people to coexist and cooperate on non-national levels of class solidarity, common occupations, or common problems such as employers and unemployment."¹⁶

Anti-Zionism was not as interlinked with Palestinian nationalism and not as specifically Palestinian as it seemed. It was there even before the Balfour-declaration of 1917, and it was both a Pan-Arab and a Palestinian issue.¹⁷ This was also because many Arabs had either business interests in Palestine or considered it part of their larger home region of *bilād aš-šām*.¹⁸ Note that in the early stages of Palestinian nationalism, it did not contradict Pan-Arabism, and when we talk about nationalism, it does not necessarily mean that its aim was the establishment of a Palestinian nation state within the borders of Israel and Palestine as we know it today.

A formative moment was the 1936 general strike, that transformed into a peasant-dominated uprising. Swedenburg even calls it "the most significant anti-colonial upheaval in the Arab East during the inter-war period". It certainly served to establish the peasant as a common denominator of Palestinian identity, as yielding "affective power". As a symbol, the Palestinian peasant overcomes the class differences we have seen so clearly in Pappé's and Khalidi's accounts of history. As persons, peasants continued to play a marginal role in politics and decision-making. Swedenburg calls this the gap between the peasant as a "historical agent" whose role and power was limited, and a "national signifier", which to this day yields great power.¹⁹

Later armed movements used reminiscences of the peasant resistance such as the *kūfiyye*,

¹³Khalidi 2010, p. 61.

¹⁴Khalidi 2010, p. 19.

¹⁵Pappé 2006, p. 78.

¹⁶Pappé 2006, p. 109.

¹⁷Khalidi 2010, p. 119.

¹⁸Khalidi 2010, p. 122.

¹⁹Swedenburg 1990, 18ff.

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a scarf or headscarf originally worn by peasants and bedouins, which then became an expression of Palestinian unity in the 1936 revolt against the British mandate and in the 1960s was again worn as a symbol of Palestinian resistance. Globally, it has become fashionable^[20] and also used as a generalized symbol of an anti-establishment mindset.^[21] They also took over a word that had first gained popularity in this context: *muqāwama*, "resistance".^[22]

The 1947 partition plan for historic Palestine that the UNSCOP proposed was opposed by the Arab citizens. It was passed after "intense lobbying by pro-Jewish groups and individuals" and immediately sparked violence which developed first into a civil war and, after other Arab states intervened, into a conventional war.^[23]

The first Arab-Israeli war wiped out the Palestinians as a national entity, as half of what they claimed was their country was taken by the victorious Israel and the other half by their Arab neighbours who used the Palestinians as convenient ties to a land they wished to control long-term. Palestinian nationalism was crushed and re-emerged on a political scale only in the 1960s. The traumatic experience, however, seems to have only strengthened Palestinian identity, as the refugees clung to their land^[24] as they still do. If you ask a Palestinian anywhere in the world where they are from, they will tell you the name of a town or village, sometimes one that was razed to the ground, regardless of whether they themselves have ever even been physically near it. "Quite small children usually know what village they come from, and village consciousness persists in spite of the fact that it has been overlaid by a Palestinian national consciousness, imbued by the Resistance movement."^[25]

It was a watershed event also in the sense that the experience of trauma Palestinians went through and that continues until this day is the basis of a shared Palestinian experience distinct from that of the rest of the Arab world.

The *nakba*, "catastrophe", of 1948 is the most decisive moment in Palestinian history, even more than the year 1967 when Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza strip, the Golan heights and the Sinai peninsula. "The Nakba has [...] been extremely influential in defining Palestinian concepts of nationalism, identity, and survival."^[26] It is not only an incision in the history of Palestinians, but a disruptive moment for their identity and society.

"For the Palestinians, the Nakba is not merely about their defeat, their ethnic cleansing from Palestine, and the loss of their homeland, nor even about having become a people living predominantly as refugees outside their land and as a fragmented minority living under occupation in their own land. The Nakba also represents the destruction of hundreds of villages and urban neighborhoods, along with the cultural, economic, political, and

²⁰A fact about which British Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansour complains angrily in her most famous song "El Kofeyye Arabeyye", claiming it to be a distinctly Arab piece of clothing.

²¹Schwartz-DuPre and Scott ^[2015].

²²Khalidi ^[2010], 106ff.

²³^[United Nations Resolution 181] ^[13.02.2021].

²⁴Khalidi ^[2010], p. 27.

²⁵Sayigh ^[2007], p. 6.

²⁶Aboubakr ^[2017], p. 219.

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social fabric of the Palestinian people. It is the violent and irreparable disruption of the modern development of Palestinian culture, society, and national consciousness. It is the ongoing colonization of Palestine that continues to the present through colonial practices and policies such as Jewish settlements, illegal land acquisition, imposing siege on Gaza, and the evacuation of villages.²⁷

The sites Palestinian villages had stood on were re-named Hebraised versions of the place-name. "Lubya became Lavi, and Safuria Zipori, although Iteit retained its original name. David Ben-Gurion explained that this was done as part of an attempt to prevent future claim to the villages. It was also supported by the Israeli archaeologists, who had authorized the names as returning the map to something resembling 'ancient Israel'.²⁸

In Israel's collective memory, the 1948 war was a war of national liberation against British colonism and Arab hostility. It is often depicted as a war that was won against all odds, by the sheer virtue and commitment of the Israelis. This is not entirely true, as they were much more organised and better armed than their Arab opponents.²⁹

This does not mean that at the time, the pictures of Palestinian refugees who had to leave their homes in a hurry did not spark heated discussions among the Zionist leaders, some of whom had fresh memories of being driven out of their homes in Europe.³⁰

The uprooting not only affected those physically expelled. "When refugees streamed into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, their presence undermined the traditional structures of society there, threatening to revolutionize the Palestinian political milieu altogether.³¹

After 1948, there was first *qawmiyya*, Arab nationalism, which also served the interest of other Arab states. Around this time, however, Palestine was gradually extracted from the general context and Palestinian nationalism arose, still mostly embedded in Arab nationalism.³²

Under the circumstances that denied the Palestinians self-determination and undermined their social cohesion as a people, all the more urgency and importance was attached to the process of nation-building. It naturally revolved around physical presence on the land since this was what most immediately decided whether the Palestinians would persist or not, and deprivation of land was also the most immediate cause of misery. Being a peasant in itself became an act of resistance on this highly contested soil, and refusing to vanish without a trace became what made a person a Palestinian. Definition through struggle became a central motive of Palestinian nationalism. Thus, the image of peasantry and Palestinianess became intricately connected. But it only played out in full after it became clear that a peaceful solution of the conflict was far from reach yet again when all territories until then held by Jordan (West Bank and East Jerusalem) and Egypt (Gaza strip) were occupied by Israel in 1967 and efforts to exchange "land for peace" failed.

²⁷Bashir et al. 2018, p. 1.

²⁸Pappé 2006, p. 138.

²⁹Pappé 2006, p. 140.

³⁰Bashir et al. 2018, p. 9.

³¹Pappé 2006, p. 165.

³²Reinkowski 1995, p. 218.

7.2. Palestine - *ṣumūd* as a value

Violence has become a dominant factor in the lives of Israelis and Palestinians alike. Leaving out the negative impact military conscription may have on the lives of young Israelis who face extremely difficult situations equipped with heavy weaponry that does not support de-escalation, and having only briefly touched on the fear and uncertainty spread by attacks by Palestinians on Jewish citizens of Israel, as this is not the focus of the thesis, this section focusses on Israeli aggression and resistance to it and elaborates particularly on the idea of resistance as a constituent of identity. Israeli aggression has impacted every Palestinian individual and is all-encompassing. It is felt particularly harshly in the Palestinian territories and includes "[i]mprisonment, exile, house demolitions, curfews, house arrests, and myriad other measures (including bombings of civilian areas from war planes)." ³³ In facing such practices, *ṣumūd*, "steadfastness" has a special role, expressed and interpreted in various ways.

For some, violent activism is a response that is only natural when meeting oppression of this kind. Sayigh states: "Few peoples have been more systematically kept helpless in the face of attack than the Palestinians, and it is not surprising that the symbol of their resurgence after 1967 was the gun. To a people for whom dispersion had added new divisions to the older class and party divisions in Palestine, the gun was both a means to creating 'one mass for the return' and a symbol of their regained identity as strugglers and Palestinians." ³⁴ Sayigh thus allows for a glimpse of the glorification of the resistance movement embodied by the *fidāʿī*.

This is further enhanced by the belief that the struggle remains unchanged and that the struggle of the peasant revolt of 1936 is the same struggle that united city-dwellers and camp-dwellers in the first intifāda and that lives on in the rock-throwing children and occasional shooting stars of rebellion such as ʿAḥed at-Tammīmī, and the belief that the struggle for liberation allows for desperate and violent measures like suicide attacks. ³⁵

It was after the 1967 war that the struggle became a key element in nation-building. "Al-Muqawwama[!]" emerged from the 1967 war much stronger, and won legitimacy throughout the Palestinian world. The movement's leaders achieved this by adapting concepts such as those of Frantz Fanon, who advocated the primacy of the struggle itself over its objectives. Hence, the eighth clause of the PLO's charter declared that 'the armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine is a strategy, not tactics'. The struggle itself was seen as the way to maintain the national identity; there was no need for achievements beyond that. As it happened, there were no achievements to report in the realm of 'liberation': the PLO was leading one of the few Third World liberation movements that had yet to free one inch of its homeland." ³⁶

Conservative elements of religious and rural social order were kept in place in order to contain emerging social movements until the 1980s. This ambivalence is best expressed as a theoretical idealisation of the *fidāʿī* as a simple man who strove for independence, but

³³Taraki et al. 2006, p. xxix.

³⁴Sayigh 2007, p. 162.

³⁵Reinkowski 1995, p. 158.

³⁶Pappé 2006, p. 190.

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not from his own leadership. It is also noticed in another arena: agricultural labour was economically marginalised and culturally valorised at the same time. Holding on to the land is seen as a patriotic duty, all the while becoming less and less viable economically.³⁷

Hilal argues that social class plays a marginal role in the organisational structure of Palestinian society because of the "colonial situation" that encouraged family and clan solidarity. Moreover, the political agenda was geared toward national liberation, not socioeconomic change.³⁸ As mentioned before, national liberation still takes primacy in the minds of many people over socioeconomic development. Thus, social movements try to tie their goals to the greater goal of liberation and frame their cause within the greater struggle.

Since the working class had developed in dependence on the colonisation process, the Palestinian worker cannot serve as a national signifier.³⁹ Neither can the urban intellectual, who has suffered little and throughout history often clung to power at the expense of nationalist ideals. The narrative of the peasant is also one of innocence. The bourgeoisie profited from the Ottomans, the Mandate and Zionism to some extent, but the peasants mostly bore only the negative impact.

The emphasis on resisting the occupation was carried on in the first intifāda. Resistance was never organised along class lines, even where there were strong class differences. The trade and worker's unions that were important organisational structures of the first intifāda in the villages had a strong local component instead of a connection to class. The *fidāʿī* was replaced by a new generation: The *aṭfāl al-ḥiḡāra*, "children of the stones", who used stones and slings instead of kalashnikovs. "This demonstrative transformation from rifle to stone was a powerful means of resignifying resistance from military engagement to grassroots civil disobedience."⁴⁰

It is then that the intricate connection between peasantry and resistance took shape, as symbols borrowed from peasant revolts prevailed and a narrative of a pure Palestine was generated, untarnished by colonialism and modernism.⁴¹ Peasants were believed to not have been defense-ready enough to successfully resist the occupation, and therefore perfectly align with the stone-thrower narrative who fights against tanks and automatic rifles. Moreover, "[i]n throwing a stone, Palestinians were metaphorically throwing pieces of the nation, pieces of their bodies, and pieces of the body politic at their enemies."⁴²

As other points of orientation disintegrated, religion also became a more powerful player during the first intifāda, a trend that continued through the second intifāda. "The fact that many of the more fortunate city dwellers were highly secularized in style and outlook only made those in more deprived areas more antagonistic towards wealth and intellectualism."⁴³ This may have helped shape the image of the ideal Palestinian as a peasant, and the emphasis on "traditional" values.⁴⁴ For example, in a praising article

³⁷Swedenburg 1990, p. 23.

³⁸Taraki et al. 2006, p. 195.

³⁹Swedenburg 1990, p. 24.

⁴⁰McDonald 2013, p. 131.

⁴¹McDonald 2013, p. 132.

⁴²McDonald 2013, p. 133.

⁴³Pappé 2006, p. 247.

⁴⁴Even though regarding religion, there is of course a difference between folk belief and the religiousness

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on Maḥmūd Abu Hannūd, a leading figure of the militant Qassām brigades of Ḥamās in the post-Oslo period, states: "Maḥmūd was born in a family that pursued agriculture to make a living, where the produce of mountain agriculture is scarce, a childhood that earned him the hardness of men and the determination of the mountains."⁴⁵

In the second intifāḍa, the politics of symbols took a tragic turn: "As Palestinian-Israeli violence reached levels unprecedented since 1982, a new cultural symbol of resistance emerged. The shahid (martyr), the suicide bomber, became the latest symbol of the culture of resistance. Not surprisingly, it was at this time that Hamas's[!] popularity reached its height, helped by a combination of the organization's ability to capture the popular imagination through the launching of spectacular 'resistance tactics,' including suicide bombings, at the same time as the increasing irrelevance and helplessness of the Fataḥ and the PNA.⁴⁶ Also helping Hamas's popularity was Israel's assassination of the organization's wheelchair-bound founder and leader, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin." The resistance movement had gained such momentum that the official Palestinian leadership was unable to contain it.⁴⁷

This was not only a change on the political and military levels, it also affected popular culture. "In the Second Intifāḍa, the Islamic movements Ḥamās and Islamic Jihad widely succeeded in imposing cultural hegemony. They replaced the secularist-nationalist *kūfiyye* with a black mask⁴⁸ and the embroidered dress with Islamic attire."⁴⁹ Arguably, this was not a complete replacement of former national symbols, but rather an addition to the canon of nationalist symbolism.

While before the second intifāḍa, the bypass roads and military zones served to prevent the expansion and connection of Palestinian towns and villages, after the second intifāḍa, they became "military borders" that isolated one Palestinian area from the other. The separation wall completed the policy of isolation. "In the process, it is breaking the social fabric of Palestinian society and separating communities and families from each other, from their homes and land, and from the needed daily services."⁵⁰

When in 2002, as a response to the second intifāḍa, Israel re-occupied the main Palestinian cities, this marked a drastic incision into Palestinian lives. Palestinians have been hailed for their resilience, and the Palestinian family for its "ability to absorb shocks and to provide sustenance to its members." But the reality is far from ideal, and the effectivity of coping mechanisms depends very much on personal disposition, individual choices and opportunities, and the socio-economic situation of the individual. Despite the portrayal of steadfastness as a uniquely Palestinian trait, not everybody is suited for enduring the hardship of multi-layered oppression by an external power alongside the perils of a dominant patriarchal culture in crisis.⁵¹

inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood that Ḥamās propagated.

⁴⁵ *Mahmoud Abu Hanood* [12.03.2021].

⁴⁶ Palestinian National Administration, throughout this thesis referred to as the PA, "Palestinian Authority".

⁴⁷ Kamrava [2016], p. 59.

⁴⁸ This was also adopted by leftist groups. Some women chose to cover their faces to protect their identity.

⁴⁹ Taraki et al. [2006], p. 188.

⁵⁰ Taraki et al. [2006], p. 107.

⁵¹ Taraki et al. [2006], xvii f.

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In connection with "Operation Defensive Shield", even mundane acts "are often framed as part of the national narrative of resistance and steadfastness."⁵² During the most immediate period of the re-occupation of cities, social life in Palestine was "put on hold" by curfews. Weddings, funerals, going to work and even to the hospital was decided by a few hours of lifted curfew. Even today, movement between the West Bank and Israel is very limited: to citizens of Israel, residents of Jerusalem and those holding a valid *taṣrīḥ* only issued to those who work in Israel, medical personnel and business people. Such permits can be revoked anytime and without reason or notice.⁵³ Since 2000, the "discourse finds virtue in adversity", and to make do with the life one is restricted to, every simple act has to be endowed with political meaning. Thus, a proactive version of steadfastness is adopted.⁵⁴ One could say, in circular reasoning, being Palestinian means to resist Israeli occupation, and resisting the Israeli occupation⁵⁵ makes a person a Palestinian.

This alleged unity of fate for all Palestinians does not withstand a reality check. There is a great difference between those targeted directly by Israeli aggression and those targeted in a less direct manner. This difference is local, and therefore it is also economic, as it is a question of mobility: those who can afford to move can escape being targeted, to a certain degree. This is exemplified by Ramallah being labelled a "five-star prison", in contrast to the rest of Palestine, also regarded a prison, but without the convenience. This bears witness to a dynamic we will see below in the section on Nabulsi identity: others do not suffer like we do and they cannot understand our suffering, nor do they care.

Contrasting different cities within the West Bank serves to illustrate this. "Part of the intelligentsia views Ramallah as the promising incubator of a cosmopolitan and secular ethos, while another despises it as the seat of a corrupt and capitulatory elite."⁵⁶ "The destruction in Ramallah⁵⁷ targeted mainly the PA infrastructure. Resistance was minimal. In Nablus, resistance lasted much longer, and the destruction was therefore more thorough and less targeted/more chaotic."⁵⁸ Ramallah's secularity and modernity undermines the "hegemonic culture of resistance". This culture of resistance is identified by asceticism and a readiness to make sacrifices for the greater cause.⁵⁹

⁵²Taraki 2008, p. xx.

⁵³Taraki et al. 2006, p. 107.

⁵⁴Taraki et al. 2006, p. xx.

⁵⁵I notice a certain vagueness in the use of the term "occupation". This stems from it being employed with different meanings by different participants in the discourse on Palestine. While some commentators view the Palestinian territories as under Palestinian control, a more pro-Palestinian stance is that the Palestinian territories are still under occupation. Some pro-Palestinian voices argue that all of Israel/Palestine belongs to the Palestinians and therefore, all of it is occupied. I have tried to use the term carefully throughout this thesis: to denote the occupation of all of the West Bank, Gaza strip and East Jerusalem from 1967 until the establishment of the PA, the occupation of Palestinian cities in 2002 as well as for the ongoing immediate control of Area C and practices of incorporating land into Israel and holding on to land that was designated to be handed over to full Palestinian control but has not (area B). Only the very small area A is under the control of the PA, and Israeli control is carefully deployed around it, thus making it impossible to speak of a "Palestinian state".

⁵⁶Taraki 2008, p. 12.

⁵⁷In 2002.

⁵⁸Bleibleh 2012, 46f.

⁵⁹Taraki 2008, p. 14.

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The outside pressure on Palestinian identity may serve to make expressions of identity more affirmative and serve to suppress elements of contention. In her analysis of poetic duelling at weddings in the Galilee, Yaqub postulates the ceremonial event moved away from its liminal character, "in which the disruption of (Palestinian) social hierarchies is celebrated, to an occasion for affirming those hierarchies and the values that accompany them". Although the Palestinians inside the state of Israel face a different situation than those of the West Bank, a tentative parallel can be drawn to the unequivocal stressing of unity and continuity that overcomes all divisions, which are regarded as minor issues. A pure and untarnished, even "exaggerated" Palestinian identity is evoked. "[...] Palestinians through their poetry are creating for themselves an idealized Arab heroic construct and situating their own Palestinian identity squarely within it."⁶⁰

There is an alliance between the heroicism that is linked to an imagined past and the inherently unheroic situation of the Palestinians. In a mythical past, inhabited by mythical figures (although some may be based on real persons), identification with better times is possible. In those times, enemies could be slain with a sword or shot dead with a rifle. Complexity is reduced when looking back in hindsight. Note in this context a description of the setting of Palestinian oral poetry: "[..T]he heroic construct created in the performance is defined as explicitly Arab and bedouin, harking back to an age in which warfare was conducted with horses, swords and lances, when battles occurred on the more human level of single combat, when heroism was clearly defined and hence attainable. An idealised 'ancient time', whether it be the semi-historical times of the pre-Islamic hero-poet ʿAntara, that of the Bani Hilal of the Arab conquests in Africa, or a more generic, mythical past, is clearly evoked through the performance. This heroic time evoked in the performance contrasts starkly with the present [...]."⁶¹

⁶⁰Yaqub 2007, 161f.

⁶¹Yaqub 2012, p. 24.

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8.1. The social space

Locality plays an undeniably important role for the identity of Palestinians. "The production of locality takes place between non-hierarchical local entities such as neighbourhoods, villages and cities, but may suffer limitations when a nation state regulates this production by providing an overruling context."¹ Producing locality is not only a way to make sense of a place, it is also a practice to create a place that is meaningful.²

Although I argue for a distinct local Nabulsi identity, it is important to note that Palestinians themselves always provide a link to a greater cultural context, both in what they say and in what they practice. The interference of national identity with local identity can be fruitful as well as destructive. In some instances, local identities are linked bottom-up to Palestinian identity, as for example described by Yaqub 2012 on producing locality in poetry duels in the Galilee. This practice connects the persons present at the poetic duel with a wider context. Through reciting a long list of family names and place names, Palestinian presence in Israel is asserted. There is no conflict that arises between local identity and the wider context into which it is integrated. Where national identity hijacks local identity, the friction that accrues becomes irreconcilable, as locally important issues are suppressed for the sake of a larger purpose.

Looking at regional differences before looking at differences in type of locality, "in particular the categories of city, refugee, camp, and village that are often used to analyze Palestinian society" may prove important. While those categories remain useful, a sense of locality might bridge some of the divides. This was confirmed to me in various interviews, but it remains uncertain how superficial this sense of unity really is.³

The distinction between Nabulsi and Palestinian identity is of course far from clear-cut, and my interviewees made sure to always tie Nabulsi identity to Palestinian identity. People seem to integrate their Nabulsi identity into their Palestinian identity, at least at a conscious level. Khalidi stresses the constructed nature of a national identity, which is not an ontologically given factor but rather the use of pre-existing identities and employing a certain view on history to further political causes. A feeling of belonging to the Jabal Nablus area is much older than a feeling of belonging to a Palestinian nation.⁴

The Nablus Governorate consists of various parts: the old city and the area surrounding it, the new city, the refugee camps - there are three refugee camps around Nablus: *ʿAskar*,

¹Yaqub 2012, p. 27.

²Appadurai 1996, p. 186.

³Taraki et al. 2006, p. 56.

⁴Khalidi 2010, p. xi.

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Balāṭa and *ʿAyn Bēt el-Māʾ*? - and about 60 villages.⁵ The old city is located right next to the new city centre.

Even though the Old City is subject to urban drift and many people move to more attractive neighbourhoods, leaving it inhabited by the poor who cannot afford to do so, it is perceived as the heart of the city. During the second *intifāḥ*, it suffered severe damage, and the curfew was imposed more strictly than elsewhere. Today, it is the most impoverished part of Nablus. It exhibits traits of a social structure otherwise more common in villages: People in the old city frequently do not lock their doors, because they know their neighbours and know that they would not steal from them.⁶

In 2009, the old city was inhabited by 13,000 persons, which equals 3,723 households with an average family size of 6 to 7 persons.⁷ Its role is not only historical, but it has an "enduring legacy as a mixed socio-spatial urban fabric".⁸

ʿAdli Yaʿīš, a businessman from the Rafīdyā neighborhood and the mayor of Nablus shortly before his re-election in 2016 said: "I love Nablus so dearly. I love its hills, its Old City, and its diverse people." Him mentioning the old city makes sense in this context: no one would ever mention the newer neighborhoods or say they loved the camps. The old city stands synonymously for all things Nabulsi and a glorified image of the city.

Nablus is home to a Sunni muslim majority and Christian and Samaritan minorities. While the Samaritan faith is a branch of Judaism and they enjoy certain privileges and conveniences such as free travel to Israel (*ad-dāxil*, "the inside" in the colloquial), where about half of their community lives in Holon, they are also a long-standing part of the population of Nablus and often invoked to show that resentment of Israel by Palestinians is not directed against Judaism - "the Samaritans are Jewish, but they are a part of us and stand with us". Samaritans associate the first temple with mount Gerizim instead of the Temple Mount/*al-ḥaram aš-šarīf* in Jerusalem.⁹

During the second *intifāḥ*, the Samaritans were separated from their fellow Nabulsis. They live in a closed community on Mount Gerizim rather than in the *Yāsmīne* quarter like they used to in former times. It is then that the privileges they enjoyed over their Muslim and Christian counterparts became apparent, so "it has become important to point out to Muslim listeners that the curfews imposed by the Israeli army on Nablus during the second intifada negatively affected the Samaritans."¹⁰

Policies of sectarian separation were employed by the British and remained a tactic in the Zionist movement.¹¹ The unity of all Nabulsis regardless of religion is stressed often. Being divided along religious lines is not approved of. Living and working "side by side" is emphasised frequently, regarding both Christians and Samaritans.¹² This, however, represents only the official version of sectarian relations. Both the Muslim majority and

⁵Kamal 2015, p. 7.

⁶Kamal 2015, p. 99.

⁷Bleibleh 2012, p. 37.

⁸Bleibleh 2012, p. 51.

⁹Droeber 2018, pp. 245–247.

¹⁰Droeber 2018, p. 251.

¹¹Sayigh 2007, p. 10.

¹²Kamal 2015, p. 104.

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the Christian and Samaritan minorities genuinely emphasise this version, and minorities stress that they, too, are affected by the Israeli occupation and have participated in the two intifādas.¹³ Problems minorities may face in a society that is predominantly Muslim are largely ignored. "[...E]ven if there is an awareness of religious diversity among some members of the majority, it is frequently emphasised that Muslims are in the majority, and that, therefore, the identity of the country should be and will be Muslim. Suffice it at this point to note that speaking about diversity – be that of a religious, class, or geographic kind – was generally not encouraged in the Nablus context."¹⁴ Unity that crosses religious borders is part and parcel of the Palestinian nation building project.¹⁵ This does not mean that religious coexistence is only superficial or not genuine. In my interviews, only one person mentioned potential for conflict between religious groups.¹⁶

For a fact, there are certain dividing factors. For example "racism" (or rather, classism) towards people from the village used to be wide-spread. The bridal price (*mahr*) for a village woman was usually much lower than that for an urbanite woman, which is why in times of economic hardship men used to marry women from outside the city. This to a certain extent disrupted social relations in the old city.¹⁷

In old times, this was allegedly different: "[...T]here were no sharp dividing lines between city and country. Indeed, Nablus was, in some ways, akin to a very large village: at sunrise many Nabulsis exited the city gates to work on the extensive olive groves, vineyards, and orchards that covered the terraced slopes, as well as in the fields, vegetable gardens, and grain mills that were scattered across the valley. In a reverse flow, peasants poured into the city to sell their goods and to search for wedding clothes, work tools, cooking utensils, rice, coffee, and a host of other items. For them, as for their urban counterparts, Nablus was (to use a common metaphor) the beating heart of the surrounding hinterland."¹⁸ The fragmentation of Palestine was often attributed to British mandate policies, both in my interviews and in literature.¹⁹

Mobility between the city and the village used to be high. This did not end with physical, day-to-day mobility and patronage relationships that were, although certainly exploitative at times, still intricate and personal. It was also expressed in the integration of rural landowners into the city and, in the other direction, city landowners expanding their holdings into the rural lands. The peasants were farming for subsistence less than in other regions, and thus an interdependence between city and village ensued.²⁰

In more recent times, people have become aware of outsiders and newcomers. Although none of my interviewees wanted to have anything to do with looking down on camp-dwellers or villagers and in fact stressed that all Nabulsis are or should be equal, many

¹³"This public affirmation of being part of the national struggle serves to emphasise that the fight is not a Muslim but a Palestinian one. This has been relatively easy to claim for the first intifada, but a lot more difficult for the second one, which was framed in largely Muslim terms.", Droeber 2018:251.

¹⁴Droeber 2018, p. 259.

¹⁵Cf. Drober 2018.

¹⁶Interview with ʿAbdullah.

¹⁷Kamal 2015, 104f.

¹⁸Doumani 1995, p. 26.

¹⁹See for example the interview with Umm Nādā, or Sayigh 2007.

²⁰Taraki et al. 2006, 9f.

admitted that people do see class differences. In addition to that, there is scepticism towards strangers.²¹ In a city where everybody knows everybody, and where trust is built upon a close-knit network, it is suspicious not to know anything about somebody.²² This kind of division has been fading recently, as several of my interviewees stressed.²³

As mentioned above, the urban fabric of Nablus was most decisively influenced by two interconnected events of the recent past: the Israeli *iğtiyāh*, "invasion" in 2002 and the following *hiṣār*, "siege".

What in Arabic is referred to as the *iğtiyāh*, "invasion", is otherwise known as "Operation Defensive Shield" of April 2002. The Israeli military re-occupied major Palestinian cities that had already come under the authority of the PA. The Nabulsi experience was particularly dramatic, as the IDF used tactics that violated both the people and their city. "A tactic called 'walking through walls' was employed: to avoid direct confrontation on the streets, which the citizens of Nablus navigated way better than the Israeli soldiers, they literally blew up walls, floors and ceilings and moved through the city digging tunnels, hidden from the sight of all but the persons whose homes they entered in this violent manner. Thus, they did not oblige to the logic of the space as they found it, but rather created their own logic of movement by altering the space, invading the private domain prior to this left out of the realm of warfare. A detail adds to the outrageousness of these tactics: Muslim women who decided to wear a headscarf would usually wear it in any public domain or around guests, but not in their home."²⁴

Violence did not stop with the immediate effects of the invasion. A curfew was imposed on the citizens of Nablus, electricity was frequently cut off and military raided houses in search of militant resistance or wanted persons. Doumani in 2004 writes: "The nightly raids to target militiamen after the re-occupation of Nablus in 2002 are apt to further divide: into militants and civilians, as anyone helping the militias was severely punished, and into quiet and unruly neighborhoods. The clear message was, that any kind of protest only brought distress to everybody and had better be refrained from."²⁵

This period is referred to as the *hiṣār*, "siege". It was obvious that it was painful for my interviewees to talk about what they experienced during this time. As mentioned before, the tactics of the IDF affected uninvolved civilians, many were killed or wounded, and they spread fear hardly imaginable.²⁶

After the siege, new dividing factors appeared in coping with the aftermath of the invasion. The members of the armed resistance, often referred to as *ṣabāb*, "[...] armed by the political factions [...] used force to settle personal disputes."²⁷

When conditions were harshest, "one destiny brought everybody together".²⁸ But after the most daunting time was over, fragmentation increased. The election victory of Ḥamās

²¹Note that this applies to unknown neighbours and that guests in my experience are exempt from this kind of scepticism.

²²Kamal 2015, p. 105.

²³Interviews with Nādā, ṢAbīr.

²⁴Bleibleh 2012, 2f.

²⁵Doumani 2004, p. 43.

²⁶Cf. Amahl 2005.

²⁷Bishara 2005, p. 11.

²⁸Kamal 2015, p. 106.

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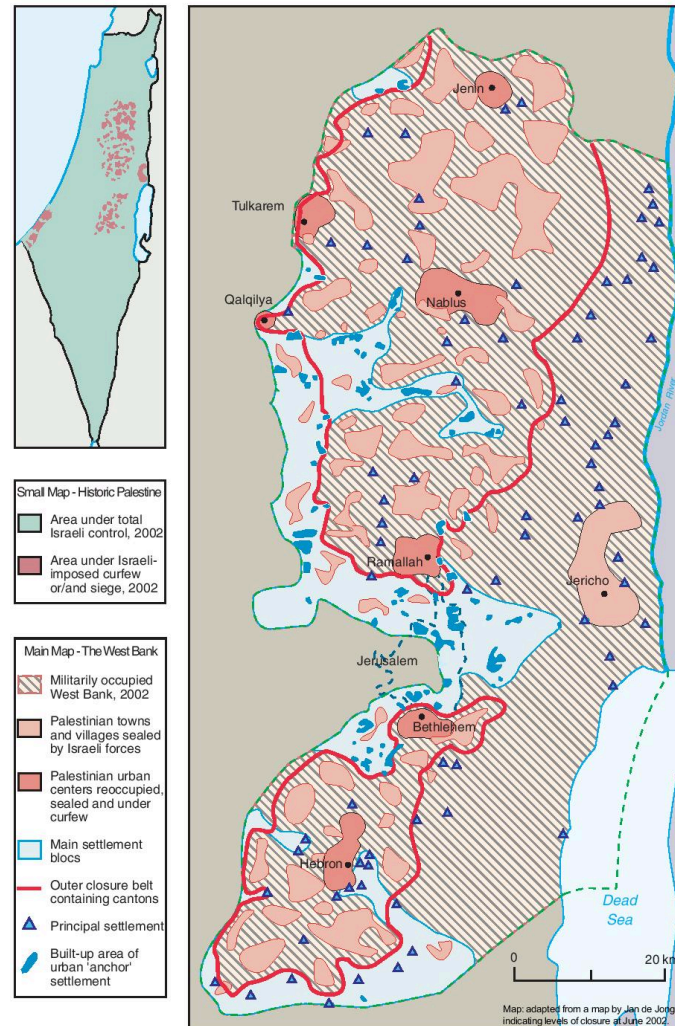


Figure 8.1.: The areas invaded and put under closure in 2001-2002. ©PASSIA

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was such a dividing event, but there is another factor on a social level that cannot be ignored: Those who have suffered most, namely the inhabitants of the old city, felt their suffering was not recognised and not enough compassion and help was provided by those who lived outside and suffered less. As we have seen before, Ramallah is somehow blamed for being spared much of the harassment other Palestinian cities were (and still are!) subject to. The people feel that those who did not suffer as much as they did left them alone and do not acknowledge their pain.²⁹

There is little in terms of organised psychological help, let alone governmental aid for dealing with trauma. The situation of one participant in Kamal's study is described as follows: "The physical distance from the place of destruction and the fact that none of her family members were killed, their homes were not destroyed and they were not forced to leave, was vital for them in maintaining continuity despite the difficulties their city faced." This kind of continuity was impossible for other whose lives were changed beyond recognition.³⁰

The coping mechanism described by Kamal indicate a more positive way of dealing with trauma by those who lived outside of the old city. For her case study, Kamal describes a woman from outside who dealt with her memories in a humorous way and also found collective action helped her confront the danger when she needed to.³¹ The other person in the case study, who lived in the old city, rather resigned herself to it and retreated into religion as her personal way of coping.³² This, of course, can easily be attributed to class differences. As mentioned earlier, only the poorest inhabitants of Nablus still live in the old city, although many families still have houses there, and the old city continues to be lively and important for social and economic purposes.

Urban planning is poor in Nablus, and while the Old City has many historical sites, many of them are in a state of neglect. All the while, "modern" buildings spring up on the mountain slopes with little consideration for the appearance of the city.³³ My interviewees also repeatedly linked the deteriorating architectural composition of the city to a deteriorating social situation, but virtually all value the old city the centre of Nabulsi life.

The once-thriving business city suffers from the re-location of businesses, professionals and intellectuals to Ramallah and Amman, as can be seen in the *an-Naḡāma* soap factory. Haj Taher Masri's business empire set out in the 1980s in Nablus with wheat mills and selling fuels, but the soap branch today is run from Amman in Jordan.³⁴ However, it is still the economic centre of northern Palestine.

Historically, the soap factories were in the middle of the city, particularly the *Yasmīne*, *Ġarb* and *Ḥabale* quarters, and part and parcel of a lively urban centre. The larger factories moved out decades ago, however, and are now located in the newer industrial

²⁹Kamal 2015, p. 148.

³⁰Kamal 2015, p. 172.

³¹See Kamal's case study on Siham, a young woman from Nablus, op. cit.

³²See the case study of Amal, a young woman from the old city of Nablus, op. cit.

³³Kamal 2015, p. 7.

³⁴Interview with Assem Haj Mohamed, conducted in May 2020.

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areas or in Ramallah.³⁵

"Any business that required the transport of goods or people to Nablus from its traditional hinterland or beyond — or from Nablus to external markets — still operated at the mercy of Israel's military authority. Checkpoints were open, but because their infrastructure remained operational and staffed, they still posed a latent, but very real, threat to the city's economy."³⁶

"The events of 2000 have impacted the cities differently: while Hebron spent 25% of 2000-2005 under curfew, it was 20% for Nablus and only 11% for Ramallah. Those with the necessary means for mobility better invested their capital in Ramallah than in the more harshly hit cities of Hebron and Nablus."³⁷

The unequal treatment of communities, "with Nablus on one end of the spectrum and Ramallah on the other"³⁸ created feelings of disparity and dissociated the communities from one another. Historical forms of solidarity and of maintaining social order have helped Nablus survive, not only as a space inhabited by humans, but as a city with a distinct local identity and urban characteristics.

Taraki and Giacaman contrast the "traditional-urban" lifestyle in Nablus with a "globalizing urbanity" in Ramallah and a "traditional-peasant" lifestyle in Hebron. On an "urbanity spectrum", they see Nablus between Ramallah and Hebron. They looked at factors such as education, women in the workforce, and the age of the inhabitants. Furthermore, the gap between city and village is smallest in Hebron and largest in Ramallah.³⁹

There is a higher percentage of Nabulsis who moved to the Gulf region for work than of Ramallawis and Hebronites. That means, they were more exposed to alternate ways of life in other Arab countries, but not as exposed to the lifestyle of non-Arab countries as people from Ramallah.⁴⁰ The "gaze" of Nablus is turned inward, as is Hebron's, but Ramallah has a globalised outward orientation.⁴¹

8.2. The social networks

Social cohesion in Nablus is strong despite all odds. Nablus' social networks are surprisingly strong, especially since some elements - the differences between city people and camp dwellers, religious differences, class differences, outside pressure and a difficult economic situation - suggest social implosion rather than cohesion. What holds the city together are the social networks extensively explored by Kamal that somehow manage to create the resilience the city is famous for, and maybe the very reason for this is the constant pressure to which the city is subject, which had a unifying impact on the population. As much as the Israeli policies are dividing people, necessity that arises with these circumstances

³⁵Interview with Mojtaba Tbeleh.

³⁶Leech 2012, p. 34.

³⁷Taraki et al. 2006, p. 46.

³⁸Doumani 2004, p. 38.

³⁹Taraki et al. 2006, pp. 28–40.

⁴⁰Taraki et al. 2006, p. 47.

⁴¹Taraki et al. 2006, p. 50.

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keeps them together. "[It is] difficult to grasp are why and how the city and its people have managed to hold together thus far. The short explanation is that historical forms of solidarity and social networks, especially at the family and neighborhood levels, have combined with well-organized popular committees at the grassroots level to provide the minimum necessary degree of social cohesion."⁴²

Social ties are actively maintained through performing acts that reinforce customs as well as neighbourhood and kinship relations. "The city's customs and the kinship relations were and still are a powerful tool in constructing its uniqueness. People care about their families and their informal social networks, which have become a main way of overcoming the difficulties they are facing[...]."⁴³

The most important institution in Nablus certainly is the family. No member of the family is separated from it. Each person assumes a specific role, and their actions affect every other member of the family. When a person's social status and position change, for example when someone gets married, roles are negotiated and shuffled until the balance is restored.⁴⁴

The bond is particularly strong between female members of the family, especially between sisters. This might be because sisters do not have to compete over heritage like the men of the family do, and because they move out of the house when they marry, while young men are usually joined by their wives in the parents' house after marriage. With a marriage, women potentially tap a new resource for supporting their natal family, while men are expected to provide at least for their natal and nuclear family.⁴⁵

While gender roles are usually distributed in a conservative patriarchal fashion, with men being the heads of families and main breadwinners, under certain circumstances gender roles are redistributed. If the breadwinner is arrested or killed, the women of the family take over the role of providing financial support. There is "ample evidence", that the women's movement was very active in the 20th century in Nablus, and that it was one of the centres of women's activism alongside Jerusalem and the coastal cities of Jaffa and Haifa. Purportedly, there is a significant number of single women among Nablus' professionals and activists.⁴⁶

In a household survey conducted by Taraki et al., 30% of Nabulsis said that their daughters should not work outside the home, compared to 18% in Ramallah and 39% in Hebron. 31% wish for their daughters to have the same number of children as they did, compared to 15% in Ramallah and 43% in Hebron. According to Taraki and Giacaman, this indicates a wish for change in the life of their daughters stronger than in Hebron, but weaker than in Ramallah.⁴⁷

Not only the more recently assumed, but also the traditional roles of women are of great importance. Women are potent facilitators of informal social networks. Several customs related to women are reported. *Al-istiqbāl* for example was a monthly female-only

⁴²Doumani 2004, p. 38.

⁴³Kamal 2015, p. 8.

⁴⁴Kamal 2015, pp. 77–81.

⁴⁵Kamal 2015, 92f.

⁴⁶Taraki et al. 2006, p. 17.

⁴⁷Taraki et al. 2006, p. 49.

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social gathering where women wore their best clothes, sang traditional songs and danced. The women took turns inviting all female relatives and neighbours, and daughters were introduced to society at these gatherings. The loss of this tradition is told regretfully, but women's social gatherings are still an important element of social networks.⁴⁸ Another tradition highlighting the importance of women is *ʕaša būniyye*, where men are expected to invite all their close female relatives for dinner in the month of *šaʕbān*, the month before *ramadān*. In recent times, if a woman is wealthy enough, she too can invite relatives for this special kind of dinner as a sign of mutual familial support in good and in bad times. When a woman marries and moves out of her parents' house, the parental family is expected to visit after a week and bring a gift. This is to show that the woman is still supported by her natal family.⁴⁹

Other social events, not related to women in particular, are religious festivities such as *al-mawlid an-nabawi*, the prophet's birthday, and political or nationalist ceremonies, such as the remembrance of *an-nakba* on the 15th of May.⁵⁰ Such customs, traditions and festivities strengthen the bond between members of the family and their wider social network. As Kamal notes, "socialising is expensive", but it serves a purpose.⁵¹

In the small city that Nablus is, curiosity about everyone and everything has a big social function. Of course, on the one hand it is a means of social control, and a Nabulsi friend of mine who did not pray and never went to the mosque felt like this was a much bigger problem in his home town than it would have been virtually anywhere else. But on the other hand, curiosity also guarantees social security by reinforcing and strengthening the bonds between people, and by making them feel that their surroundings are familiar and they know every last detail of them.

This curiosity in my experience is displayed by Nabulsis without any sense of impropriety. That people talk about each other has been confirmed by each person I talked to, sometimes as something specific to Nablus and sometimes described as a common trait of small cities. Kamal, however, sees curiosity as one of the roots of a strong social cohesion: "[...] curiosity is an element of knowing who [the people] are dealing with: their social status, financial situation educational background and political affiliation." Keeping the information flowing is a method of establishing trust.⁵²

There seems to be a general loss of interest in the directly political. People orient their sense of belonging towards other things such as football or religion.⁵³ Because people are anxious something similar to the 2002 invasion could happen again at any given time, they spend their time and energy on being prepared for the next catastrophe. Many work a lot and mind their own business.⁵⁴ While resignation rules regarding a greater political goal, people try to make the best of the realm they can control.⁵⁵ People deem it most

⁴⁸Kamal 2015, p. 52.

⁴⁹Kamal 2015, 83ff.

⁵⁰Kamal 2015, pp. 55–58.

⁵¹Kamal 2015, p. 85.

⁵²Kamal 2015, p. 45.

⁵³Kamal 2015, p. 58.

⁵⁴Kamal 2015, p. 115.

⁵⁵Kamal 2015, 139f.

important to settle their financial situation. Many have a dual approach to the issue of nationalism. They separate the economic from the political. Thus, it is considered acceptable to work in Israel from an economic point of view, while from a theoretical standpoint, national liberation is still on top of the agenda.⁵⁶

Religiousness, which increased during the two intifādas, manifested mostly on a personal level and at the level of social conservatism, rather than as a religious popular movement. This is evident in the control of the movement of women and in women's dress. Social conservatism was in place already before the intifādas. Religion is also employed as a coping strategy for comforting and consoling people.⁵⁷

With Ḥamās, there is a movement that connects the nationalist with the religious agenda. The "religious trend" and nationalism have "mutually influenced each other", but like the bigger organisation it is affiliated with, the Muslim Brotherhood, Ḥamās gained popularity by providing basic services such as nursery schools, hospitals and charity institutions. Kamal acknowledges that Ḥamās has succeeded in creating a network of support for the people, "while the Palestinian Authority was and still is busy building so-called state institutions instead of dealing with economic and social problems."⁵⁸

While the Fataḥ-dominated PA controls the topics of the Friday sermon in mosques, many who give religious lessons that people go to for their personal consolation, are members or affiliates of Ḥamās. Religiousness takes place not only in the official realm of mosques, but also has a personal and a social dimension. In the latter, it is deeply connected and interwoven with tradition, to the extent that the two have become "inseparable".⁵⁹

Being part of the community, adhering to the unwritten rules and maintaining a good reputation is essential socially, psychologically and politically for the citizens of Nablus. Being a respected member of the community is what gives people access to public life. This includes caring for one's neighbours, helping each other and being generous. If families did not participate in the network of support, their reputation would suffer and their access to the benefit of this safety net would likely be limited. In the old city, people often leave their doors unlocked. Their neighbours would not steal from them, and they would recognise any stranger who entered the *ḥāra* ("quarter" or "neighbourhood").⁶⁰

Social status is influenced most by the role a person takes on in the community, and to a lesser extent by other factors such as wealth, education and piety, as we have seen in the example of mayor Adly Yaish and as we can read in Kamal 2015 about Salim, a man who derives his high social status and respectability from his strong involvement with grassroots activism.⁶¹ A different example is Abū Hannūd, whom we have mentioned before, a leader of the Qassām brigades. "Abu-Hannoud did not gain fame because he was a Hamas operative, he became a local legend because he had survived the assassination attempt and because of the local solidarity that the event galvanised. He is not remembered by

⁵⁶Kamal 2015, 155ff.

⁵⁷Cf. Kamal 2020

⁵⁸Kamal 2015, p. 64.

⁵⁹Kamal 2015, pp. 66–70.

⁶⁰Kamal 2015, 99ff.

⁶¹Kamal 2015, p. 151.

locals for his political affiliation, as the invasion and attempt on his life involved all of the residents of the community equally and did not distinguish between family or political faction."⁶²

In times of crisis, disputes are suspended. The neighbourhood often consists of relatives. Good neighbourhood relations were a very efficient tool for survival during the second intifāda, and they remain important as a resource for coping with its aftermath. But maybe such marginalisation of conflicts due to constant crisis prevents the long-term solution of such conflicts, because there is always something more important, a greater cause that justifies putting issues on hold.⁶³ On the local level, this is suspending conflicts of class, gender and religion for the sake of the city's unity. At a national level, this is suspending conflicts within localities as well as conflicts between localities. If there was a Palestinian nation state, it would still have to grapple with various divisions, as the country is torn between modernisation and tradition, and the West Bank population is alienated from the Israeli Arab and Gaza population.

8.3. Nablus - *ṣumūd* as resilience

Two concepts of *ṣumūd* are summed up by Taraki as follows: "Sumud's incarnations have been many, but the dominant motif has been Palestinians' determination to continue under adversity, fortified by their roots in their land, the strength of their traditions, and family and kin solidarity. Sumud has had a dull and unglamorous history, however: Martyrdom, imprisonment, and exile have been its backdrop, and it is difficult to envision joie de vivre as one of its elements. While this motif continues to hold its way among vast sections of the population, including the new middle class (which may invoke it on critical occasions), a new conception of resilience has been taking root, one that is not based on an ascetic denial of frivolity, joy, or entertainment, but rather renders the very pursuit of happiness a manifestation of resilience and of resistance at the same time."⁶⁴ Both concepts are a part of resistance in Nablus.

"Nabulsis are proud of their city's epithet, the "Mountain of Fire," an appellation deriving from a local legend that Napoleon, upon approaching Nablus, met his defeat when the inhabitants set forests and olive groves ablaze, burning the French soldiers. The legend speaks to one of the traditions for which the Nablus region is famous: as a center of resistance to outside control."⁶⁵

"In 1834, the city led a revolt against the Egyptian invasion under Ali Pasha, and 102 years on it was an important nucleus of resistance in the Arab Uprising (1936) against the British mandate. In 1963, four years before the beginning of the Israeli occupation, Nablus declared its autonomy from Jordanian rule."⁶⁶

⁶²Rickard 2014, pp. 9–10.

⁶³Kamal 2015, p. 102.

⁶⁴Taraki 2008, p. 17.

⁶⁵Doumani 2004, p. 48.

⁶⁶Leech 2012, p. 32.

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"Armed resistance is a staple feature of Nablus's relationship to the Israeli occupation."⁶⁷

The "rock and roll stars of the second intifada" were "leaders of armed militias whose favorite instrument is not the guitar, but an M16."⁶⁸

These quotes are only a selection that goes to show the legendary rebelliousness that Nablus is famously associated with. This is both a source of pride and of misery. On an abstract level, Nablus has been hailed as the home of freedom fighters, and many of its young men and women have died for an idea of heroism. Nabulsis are proud of the many leading figures of resistance their city produced. On the other hand, the dead cannot be brought back to life, and declaring death to be "martyrdom" might comfort the bereaved, but it cannot compensate for their loss.

Armed resistance comes at the cost of the spread of violence. In the power vacuum that followed the banning of Palestinian police from Nablus in 2002 by the IDF, gangs took over the streets, sometimes comprised of remnants of armed resistance, sometimes ordinary criminals or a mixture of both, and the rift between Fataḥ and Ḥamās in 2007 largely prevented them from being held accountable. The Fataḥ-allied Al-Aqsa Martyr's brigade was formed in Balata refugee camp. Some of these armed men worked for their own profit in the period of lawlessness and then seamlessly returned to work for Fataḥ, because Fataḥ's main concern had shifted to uprooting Ḥamas.⁶⁹

The resilience of Nabulsis is explained by an assumed "cultural uniqueness". While this uniqueness presents itself as if it was a character trait shared by all Nabulsis, it is arguably better described as a set of practices that emerged during hard times on the basis of existing social structures, and those practices re-enforced the social structures they were based on.⁷⁰

Nablus is not only a tough place for those who wish to establish outside control because of a mythical spirit of resistance. It is also a place that has always relied on effective ways of self-organisation. During the second intifāda, like during the first, popular committees were established. The members of those popular committees were often from prominent families who naturally had a connection to the old city. During the siege, this "was an effective way of keeping families and neighbors in a wider social network of discussion and support [...]"⁷¹ During the intifāda, they became very important, with each area being assigned a person responsible on a humanitarian level. Collective action was organised under the leadership of the popular committees, which had strong ties with the people. This was regarded as a threat to the sovereignty of the PA, and after the intifāda had ended, the leadership of the committees was transferred to posts in other cities to limit their influence. If they refused, they had to resign.⁷²

The fact that there is no freedom of movement has made mobilization on a national

⁶⁷Taraki 2008, p. 9.

⁶⁸Doumani 2004, p. 45.

⁶⁹Leech 2012, p. 33.

⁷⁰Kamal 2015, p. 38.

⁷¹Kamal 2015, p. 76.

⁷²Kamal 2015, p. 50.

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level "impractical", and more localized forms of mobilization have emerged.⁷³ I would argue that localism is not only a practice that is faster employed and more efficient, but that it is also aided by the nature of the incursions and sieges, which has been different throughout Palestine. The feeling of living through a unique experience that no one else shares, or only a very small group shares, has made people feel exposed and alone. They do not trust a state or a nation, but they trust their neighbours. Personal connection outweighs a common goal when it comes to building alliances. Due to the inefficiency of the state and state institutions, people rely on their kin and neighbourhood relations for financial and psychological support.⁷⁴

This localised resistance plays out on a day-to-day basis and is incorporated in a broader narrative of resistance where convenient. During the time the city was closed off, from 2002 until 2009, people continued their lives despite the obstacles. Children were brought to teachers living nearby to continue their education when schools were closed.⁷⁵ "Most important were the maintenance of traditions and the development of new practices to cope with the continuity of violence imposed on the city. As Kamal's study shows, it is the development of traditions (in the broadest sense) into new practices that defines the character of Nablus."⁷⁶

Even though getting used to violence and continuing as if it was normal can be framed as resistance, it is first and foremost a means of survival and of protecting one's own mental stability.⁷⁷

Violence and resistance are inevitably connected to suffering. When it comes to suffering, there is a fine line between acknowledging pain, which is important, and politicising pain, which obstructs the acknowledgement of pain on a personal level and turns it into something that is indeed shared, but also alienated from the person who suffered.⁷⁸ It is important to note that while the instrumentalisation of pain by Palestinian nationalism is hurtful and harmful, the suffering dealt with in this chapter is inflicted by Israeli policies and Israeli soldiers. Remembering is key for the national struggle. But many people feel remembering is too painful and that they had better just get on with their lives. They want to be left in peace.

Resistance in Nablus is multi-layered, and it is certainly framed as "Palestinian", while at the same time relying on patterns of behaviour and structures of society that are only available at a local level. Even people who are dissociated from an overtly political idea of resistance do participate in acts of everyday resistance, if even just continuing to live and not losing hope are considered resistance.

While there is discomfort with the peasant narrative, as will be shown below in the discussion of the interviews, such a discomfort with the resistance narrative cannot be ascertained in the interviews. While peasantry can be replaced by the local urban narrative, the narrative of resistance is constituent to Nabulsi identity and Palestinian

⁷³Taraki 2008, p. 8.

⁷⁴Kamal 2015, p. 77.

⁷⁵Kamal 2015, 11f.

⁷⁶Kamal 2015, 18ff.

⁷⁷Kamal 2015, p. 43.

⁷⁸Kamal 2015, p. 23.

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identity alike. Some accounts of discord exists, such as when a friend from Nablus (who is not among the interviewees) criticised that the mothers of "martyrs" would praise their son's deeds and heroic death in front of the camera, only to break down crying as soon as the cameras were gone. Some of my interviewees did not mention either resistance or steadfastness, and yet with others, it came up in a natural way.

The precariousness inflicted by the nationalist narrative of resistance lies in reducing Nablus to a chain of acts of resistance. By doing so, it cancels out all other forms of experience. It becomes impossible to detach an act from the greater cause of national liberation that underlies everything done by any Palestinian at any time, and it measures everything a person does by the scale of national resistance. Quite strikingly, in an interview with rappers Shab Mouri, Al Nather and Shabjdeed from Ramallah, one of them says: "You don't have to be occupied to write a hit song.", and another adds: "We need a break from everything, not just the occupation."⁷⁹ This may be true for Nablus also: a wish to lead a normal life and not have everything one does automatically be seen as related to the struggle. Many acts are deliberately done in a subversive spirit, but conflict arises where sovereignty of interpretation is taken out of the hands of the people who perform these acts.

⁷⁹Faber 13.03.2021

9. Discussion

To counteract essentialist views, it is necessary on the one hand to recognise the history of the place where the people this thesis is concerned with live. It is, on the other hand, necessary to deconstruct attempts to mold history into the most convenient form. In dealing with identity, it is incumbent on both the researcher and the reader to be aware that this concept can only be a generalisation and that individual stories naturally diverge from a more general narrative. This I have tried to do in the chapters on history, culture and identity formation in Palestine and Nablus. In the following chapter, I contrast the interviews with each other and with the information gained in the literature research.

Most importantly, the persons who navigate the many conflicting and co-existing identities they perform every day are the most important and most reliable informants - reliable maybe not in the sense that they are impartial or immune to the influence of political narratives, but reliable in the sense that they are the only ones who can really know about what concerns them personally. This is why this thesis, besides a review of literature relevant to its hypotheses of identity formation, more importantly contains a part where the "objects under study" become subjects and get to say a word. Of course, the small selection of interviewees is not representative of a Nabulsi public in a quantitative sense. Nonetheless, I argue that it does provide a good insight into the self-perception of Nabulsi and gives an impression of the topics relevant to their identity with respect to heritage construction, shown by the example of soap.

In this context, I found the following quote useful, although taken from a study on a different subject, the Ġawārna bedouins in the Galilee. "[...M]ost studies of the nexus between narration of the past and access to prestige and status in the present focus on competition at the top. They offer only limited insight into the role of kinship reckoning for groups and individuals stuck at the lower ends of social scales, with little claim to fame or fortune and hardly any means to have such claims heard and accepted. This is not trivial. For the majority of Arabs - peasants, Bedouins, and urbanites alike - competition at the top is not an option. Being part of a conservative, often explicitly hierarchical society that emphasizes continuity while ascribing deep value to blood ties and descent, their lives are more accurately described as a constant race from the bottom."¹ This is applicable to the context of Nablus as well. Although none of my interviewees is from the low end of social strata, or from a truly subaltern context, neither are they the ones who "compete at the top". The following discussion thus aspires to make people heard with their personal views on Nablus, identity and heritage.

My interviewees were from three generations, the youngest participant being 20 years of age and the oldest being 71.² Marwa and ʿAbīr were the youngest participants. Badra

¹Khawalde and Rabinowitz 2002, p. 226.

²I was lucky with my interviewees in more than one sense. For me as a researcher, it was incredibly

fell somewhere between the youngest participants and the ones in the middle. Nādā and ʿAbdullah are around 40 years old and Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq are the oldest generation I interviewed.

9.1. Nostalgia, Nablus and soap

Nostalgia or nostalgic descriptions came up frequently in the conversations and were surprisingly prominent in the younger participants' accounts. Marwa was nostalgic regarding the neighbourhood where she grew up. She described it as having been more beautiful in the past. She mentioned the trees and plants that used to dominate the landscape. Regarding the people living in her neighbourhood, she said they changed little. Nādā similarly complained about changes for the worse in her old neighbourhood, such as new buildings, lots of cars and trees being cut down. The picture she evoked of how the neighbourhood used to be was an idyllic scenery of gardens and citrus fruit trees.³ Only Badra said the neighbourhood of her childhood has not changed, and this continuity she saw as very positive. Both Badra and ʿAbdullah had a strong emotional connection with the respective neighbourhoods of their early childhood, which had to do with the connections they had with their neighbours, and both viewed the neighbourhoods they lived in at a later stage more negatively in comparison. For both, this mainly had to do with the social ties to the people living in the neighbourhood, or lack thereof. For ʿAbdullah, this was related to the different social surroundings he found at the mosque. Badra found that the bigger buildings and a lack of homogeneity of the tenants was the main reason for the disconnectedness. Both related this to the socio-spatial environment and urban planning. Ṣadīq said his neighbourhood in the old city had not changed essentially, but the shops and buildings had changed and there was more traffic and the cinema that dominated one of the streets adjacent to his house had closed. That cinema had been a landmark of the area and important culturally. Also, most who owned a building on the street had added a story or two on top of the existing ones. Umm Nādā recounted her family's property being split up and in large parts sold without bitterness. ʿAbīr did not mention changes in her neighbourhood.

The places people feel represent their city fall into two categories: The personal, where places of childhood memories represent the city, as is the case for Nādā, Badra and ʿAbdullah, and the local, where people mentioned places in the old city, most often the central *bāb is-sāḥa*, as was the case with Marwa, ʿAbīr, Badra and Ṣadīq. Badra and Ṣadīq also mentioned the public library as a place they feel has a connection to Nablus' history and their personal story. ʿAbīr and Badra explicitly mentioned the architectural uniqueness of Nablus, especially the old city. Soap factory buildings are a part of the urban architectural composition of Nablus. ʿAbdullah similarly stresses the architectural

valuable to have such a small yet diverse sample regarding age and world view. As a person, I enjoyed talking to each one of them. They were all great people who had interesting stories to tell, and they had endless patience with me and really dedicated a lot of time to answering my questions, for which I feel grateful and honoured.

³Nādā later told me of the symbolic significance of citrus trees for Palestine, but I could not determine if the connection was coincidental or intended.

9. Discussion

importance of soap factory buildings as providing a big open indoor space within the city.

ʕAbdullah said the two most Nabulsi places are the mosque and the *sūq*. His connection to the mosque is personal, and the *sūq* he cherishes because it has stayed unchanged and is still a hub for social life.

With the exception of Nādā, everybody said the most Nabulsi things were *knāfe* and soap. Nādā, who has a strong Palestinian outlook, also mentioned *zaʕtar* and the very Nabulsi speciality of *ʕakkūb*, which is traditionally collected in the surroundings of Nablus. For Nādā, all three of *zaʕtar*, *ʕakkūb* and olive oil used for soap are connected to the Palestinian soil, and she emphasised the symbolic importance of olive trees.

Most of my interviewees had an emotional connection to Nabulsi soap in addition to its perception as important for local economy and history and its perception as heritage. They connected it to childhood memories, as was the case with Nādā, or to their grandparents, as was the case with Badra. Marwa's family was involved in soap production, and she was obviously proud and also told me she tells others with pride about this fact. The family kept a soap produced by her grandfather as a family memory.

ʕAbīr especially cherished soap for being a local product made by "Palestinian hands". Nādā called it an *intāğ waṭani Nābulsi*, "Nabulsi national produce", or "product of the homeland".

A distinctive trait of Nabulsi soap mentioned several times was its purity, and that no chemicals are used are used for its production. Badra said it is "organic", and it was called "natural" by ʕAbīr and several others. I was often told that it has good quality and is perceived to be good for the skin.

ʕAbdullah and Umm Nādā also told me that soap traditionally used to be produced in homes or by farmers who used the remains of the olive harvest. This kind of soap was regarded as even purer by Umm Nādā. ʕAbdullah said it was a common practice among families to make soap, and Ṣadiq said his sister makes soap at home and gives him some.

The overwhelming majority sees practical advantages in Nabulsi soap that at least on a surface level have nothing to do with its symbolic value. The first thing most participants told me about the soap was that it cleans well and removes stains. It was curious, however, that even those who did not use it were convinced about its advantages, with the exception of Badra, who said that it causes dry skin for her. She still described it as having exceptionally positive qualities as a skincare product.

There is, however, also an emotional connection already mentioned: people use it for nostalgic reasons, because they are "used to it" or they bring it abroad to bring a piece of their home with them. Some of the interviewees said they bring soap as a gift when they visit friends abroad, and Nādā said she brings them soap to remind them that there are beautiful things in Palestine, not just occupation and suffering.

Marwa told me that in her house, Nabulsi soap is used exclusively. Nādā told me about several households in her family where she supposes Nabulsi soap is used exclusively. This was associated with being very "traditional" for them.

Soap in powder for cleaning was mentioned to me by Umm Nādā and Marwa, the former using it herself to clean.

ʕAbdullah and Ṣadiq said they use it on their hair, and Badra and Umm Nādā said their great-grandmother and mother respectively were known to have beautiful hair and

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only use Nabulsi soap. Umm Nādā also said olive oil was good for hair growth in general.

All participants had at least a general idea of how soap is made, and all could name olive oil as the main ingredient. Only Umm Nādā told me that the production process must differ from what it used to be like nowadays and that probably machines are used to produce soap. All others described the process in its traditional way, although Marwa said the packaging is probably not done by hand. ʿAbdullah and Ṣadīq even had historical knowledge about soap production, and the latter said there are business secrets regarding the exact production process and ingredients, such as using four-year-old oil to give the soap a special "flavour". ʿAbdullah and Ṣadīq both told me about the stories that surround soap that began with the crusader period. Umm Nādā and Marwa also mentioned to me that soap making goes way back in time. Ṣadīq is generally very interested in local history and told me a lot more than I could fit into this thesis.

Only Marwa said that the primary customers for Nabulsi soap are foreigners, but tourists were also recognised as buyers by Nādā. All other participants supposed that older people buy Nabulsi soap, Ṣadīq even said only the older ones still buy it. Of my interviewees, ʿAbīr and Badra did not use Nabulsi soap themselves, at least not the original unscented version. ʿAbīr and ʿAbdullah said that soap was inexpensive, and the latter said this was among the reasons why his family used to buy it.

Even though all participants stated that the ones who still use Nabulsi soap are the older generations, there were many young users among them. Marwa, Nādā, ʿAbdullah, as well as Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq said they used it themselves, although only Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq seemed to use it exclusively. Badra told me she uses products developed from Nabulsi soap, such as liquid soap.

There was ample awareness of the decline of soap production. Even though the time of the onset of this decline varied slightly in people's accounts, and also the number of factories that used to operate during the golden era of soap production, all participants agreed there used to be plenty, of which only a handful are left. The reason for this decline, according to Marwa, is that Nabulsi soap stopped being the only thing available. ʿAbīr also told me that foreign products have replaced the local soap. This was also given as a reason by Ṣadīq, although the two might have been talking about different time periods: ʿAbīr about more recent times and Ṣadīq about the mid-20th century, when European soap was first exported in great quantities to the Levant. Ṣadīq and ʿAbdullah also mentioned incidents of fraud, where factories in Cairo and the Levant produced soap in a more industrialised manner under the label of "Nabulsi soap". In addition, in 1948 the way to the sea was cut off. Only ʿAbdullah mentioned "capitalism", a reason so prominent in academic literature⁴, but not as the reason for the decline in soap production. Rather, he referred to it as a more abstract reason for economic hardship in recent times. Nādā said that political circumstances have affected soap production.

Another main reason was seen to be the younger generations who prefer perfumes and scented soaps.

In summary, a deep connection to their city was shared by the interviewees. All saw the past as a more benign time both for their city and for soap production. In soap,

⁴Cf. Graham Brown, Pappé, Khalidi and others, *op. cit.*

as has been suggested before and will be elaborated on below, the personal, local and national interlink, as it is connected to personal memories, representational of the city and viewed as a Palestinian product.

9.2. Resistance, religion, and the social fabric

Of my interviewees, Ṣadīq and ʿAbdullah told me about their direct involvement with the resistance movement. Both were politically active, Ṣadīq as a member of the armed resistance to the occupation in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and ʿAbdullah was a member of Ḥamās in the 1990s and early 2000s. Only ʿAbdullah mentioned the split between Ḥamās and Fataḥ in the interview as something that affected his life. He also connected the resistance with soap making, as the soap factory buildings were used for gatherings, sometimes of a political nature, and for storing goods to be distributed to the people during the intifāḍas. He also traced Nablus' alleged rebelliousness back in time and said they could afford relative independence because of what they earned with soap production. Also, when asked about the first thing he connects with Nabulsi soap, he spoke about research on the resistance he conducted that started out at a soap factory. Nādā also connected soap making to resistance, but did so on a more symbolic level. Since Nabulsi soap is made from olive oil, and the olive tree for many Palestinians is a symbol for their land, there is a connection between soap, resistance and *ṣumūd*, "steadfastness". She also said that unfortunately, the life of a Palestinian is just a number, because there is no state that protects the lives of Palestinians. Nādā especially connected Nablus with the resistance, by describing that it is carried out by the people and not related to high politics. In the talks I had with Ṣadīq, ʿAbdullah and Nādā, the topic of resistance came up naturally. I asked none of my interviewees about this. The others did not mention resistance and used neither *muqāwame* nor *ṣumūd* throughout the interview. This could be attributed to a generational gap, as none of the three youngest participants discussed the topic with me, although ʿAbīr did say it was important to strengthen Palestinian production. Umm Nādā, however, seemed to deliberately avoid talking to me about conflict-related topics, such as when she used the euphemism *mašākīl*, "problems" to refer to the Lebanese war that interrupted her studies in Beirut.

Religion seemed to be a topic that played a role for people, although in most interviews, it was not very prominent. With Marwa, religion was obvious in her wearing the *ḥiğāb*, whereas no other participant displayed visible signs of their religion. The other two participants with whom religion as a topic came up were Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq, the two oldest participants. Both complained that external signs of religiosity prevail over an actual and honest religiousness, and that religion had become *ʿadāt w taqālīd*, "customs and traditions". They perceived increased influence of religiosity within society as a step back, especially regarding women. Marwa, one of the youngest participants, told me however, that Nablus is special for having many popular religious ceremonies, but also special traditions that are not tied to religion.

ʿAbdullah told me about going to the mosque, and since he was a member of Ḥamās, this was only logical. He is not an obviously strictly religious person and told me he

sometimes buys wine as a gift for his in-laws.⁵

ʿAbīr stressed that Nabulsi are close to each other and help each other. Badra agrees that Nabulsi are very kind, but also told me they are not very popular in the other parts of Palestine, because they are infamous for being a little closed-off to themselves, whereas Umm Nādā said Nabulsi welcome strangers. Both ʿAbdullah and Nādā said, using the same phrase, that when you need help, Nabulsi will be there for you. The interviewees overwhelmingly agreed that the social ties within Nablus are especially strong, and many stressed that compared to other cities, there is more social cohesion in Nablus. Only Marwa did not mention this in the interview. Nādā also said that people trust each other and that there is warmth in Nablus. Umm Nādā told me that when a Nabulsi meets another Nabulsi in another place, they will treat each other like family. Ṣadīq linked the strong social fabric in Nablus to its persistence over time. He said it was never destroyed fully over the course of 2000 years, and the reason for this is the solidarity between its inhabitants, a trait that Nādā linked to their resilience. That Nabulsi gossip about each other was confirmed by all interviewees. Most attribute this to it being a small city. Everybody knows everybody and wants to know everything. Umm Nādā told me that the families know each other a little less nowadays, because many villagers came and lived in Nablus. ʿAbīr, Badra and ʿAbdullah also said that people interfere with your life. Gossip is not only a harmless social practice. For ʿAbdullah, real physical threats emerged from gossip surrounding his hostel.

All participants I asked confirmed that soap making was connected to the strong and good families of Nablus and could name a few, and many also mentioned the connection between those families and the physical space of the old city. Ṣadīq told me that by the mid-19th century, all families trying to increase their wealth invested in soap production. Marwa told me that every factory is registered in a family's name, which is proudly displayed on the factory. ʿAbīr said that even though this belief is becoming less nowadays, the great families of Nablus were once very aware of their status and of passing on their family name. Therefore, they did not usually marry persons from outside Nablus. Ṣadīq, whom I asked about this, confirmed that soap was at some point not produced for economic reasons any more, but for nostalgic and prestige reasons.

The factory that came up most often was the Ṭūqān factory next to the *duwwār*, and Badra, ʿAbdullah mentioned a soap factory next to the Brēk coffee mill in the old city. Other names that came up repeatedly were Šakʿa, Kanʿān and Nābulsi.

Many seemed to confuse the different brand names with family names, which is perhaps due to a deliberate association of brand names with a family different from the family which produces the soap. Thus, the Tbeleh family produces a brand called "Nāblus", while the an-Nābulsi family's brand is called al-Badr. The an-Nimr brand is produced by the Šakʿa family.

Only Ṣadīq had brand awareness, and Umm Nādā said she distinguishes between the soap factories and buys from *ṣabbānāt mrattabe*, whereas most younger participants could name a few brands, but did not have a preference. This suggests that all kinds and brands of Nabulsi soap are roughly the same to them. Badra, Nādā and ʿAbīr mentioned

⁵Who are from Europe and presumably Christians.

products developed from Nabulsi soap or other kinds of renewed soap. All of them saw this as a positive development.

Many mentioned the "castles" the original families of Nablus still have in the old city. ʕAbīr and Umm Nādā told me there is a programme in place to renovate and preserve these old family houses. Of those "castles", one belonged to the family of Umm Nādā.

ʕAbdullah viewed the feudalism of the big soap making families negatively. Already in old times, they used their wealth to engage in local conflicts of power, he described. They also engaged in the practice of *ribā*, "usury" by giving out loans with a high interest. He mentioned that the decline of their wealth is attributed by popular belief to this unislamic practice.

What connects the three topics that make up the title of this section (resistance, religion, social fabric) is the overwhelming tenet that Nabulsi society is close-knit, regardless of religious, regional and class differences. Nablus' capacity for resistance is attributed mainly to the uniquely tight connections between its citizens.

9.3. Divisions, differences and heritage

None of my participants told me about divisions within Nablus without being prompted by me to do so, but ʕAbīr, one of the youngest interviewees strongly confirmed there is a great awareness of who is a Nabulsi and who is an outsider. ʕAbdullah, whose wife is from Italy, said that his wife and he are only regarded as proper Nabulsis when they do something good. People unanimously said this was becoming less in recent times, and Nādā entirely locates this behaviour in the past. Badra mentioned that in the first neighbourhood where she lived, all their neighbours were similar to them and life was harmonious, whereas in the new building, there are people from outside Nablus and they do not know all of them anymore.

Of my participants, at least Marwa, Badra, ʕAbdullah, Umm Nādā and ʕadīq seemed to be aware of the standing their own respective families have in the social networks of Nablus. Regarding Umm Nādā, I found it very interesting that she told me she had always been in Nablus, even though she pursued her university education abroad in Beirut.

Only ʕAbdullah told me about religious differences and how they might cause problems. He said that the owners of a soap factory building could not get rid of the tenant of the building because he was Christian and therefore protected as a minority, even though the man, according to ʕAbdullah, was a drunkard. Nādā on the other hand, said several times how there was no difference between religious groups in Nablus. Nādā, Umm Nādā, ʕAbdullah and ʕadīq mentioned the Samaritans. Nādā mentioned the people from the refugee camps, too and said they are also a part of Nablus, as well as villagers. The other interviewees sometimes mentioned villagers, but no one else referred to the camp-dwellers.

All except the two oldest participants did not perceive a difference between Palestinian and Nabulsi heritage when asked directly, but Marwa told me about several customs specific to Nablus. This she explains with Nablus being a part of Palestine, and Nabulsi heritage being a part of Palestinian heritage. The same definition is applied by ʕAbīr and Badra. ʕAbīr even rejected the idea of a distinct Nabulsi and therefore non-Palestinian

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heritage strongly. None of the three youngest participants said that Nabulsi heritage is distinct from Palestinian heritage in the sense that there are things that are Nabulsi, but not Palestinian. ʿAbdullah made the connection the other way around and said that all Nabulsi things are Palestinian, but not all Palestinian things are Nabulsi. Nādā said that personally, she does not see a difference. The differences between Nablus and other cities are just in the *ʿadāt w taqālīd*, "customs and traditions", and not fundamental. Only Umm Nādā said that soap is a specifically Nabulsi heritage that does not belong to the general realm of Palestinian heritage, and Ṣadīq said that soap can be considered Palestinian heritage, but it is originally and to a greater extent Nabulsi heritage.

Only ʿAbdullah said that his awareness of Nabulsi soap as heritage has only recently developed, and before that, he had only practical reasons for using it. According to him, it is really a part of Levantine heritage, because several cities in the Levant used to produce it. This is also mentioned by ʿAbīr.

Badra and ʿAbdullah told me about the discomfort they feel regarding the embroidered Palestinian dress. Both of them said they perceive the embroidered dress as a kind of heritage they only appropriated but which is not their own, because their female ancestors did not wear this kind of dress. They seemed to have only adopted it because of its symbolism but showed discomfort with it not being part of their family history and family heritage. Badra said that, despite this discomfort, she loves Palestinian embroidery and occasionally wears the *tōb*.

ʿAbdullah told me of his own accord that he thinks national identities are invented. He said that there are many Palestinian identities, which he was made aware of by his wife. He attributed this perceived lack of a national identity to the nonexistence of a nation state and said he considers this one of the few advantages.

Several of my interviewees place Palestine, and therefore Nablus, within a bigger entity of *bilād aš-šām*. Marwa said many traditions link Nablus to Damascus. Badra mentioned the Nabulsi dialect and cuisine in this context. Ṣadīq gave an explanation as to how this connection came about: trade relations and intermarriage. The other city that was mentioned most often by the interviewees in contrast or similarity to Nablus was Ramallah, which is seen as quite different to Nablus, and described as more open on the one hand, and more arbitrary regarding social bonds on the other. Hebron, however, is contrasted with Nablus by ʿAbdullah describing it as having more archaic practices and being less socially progressive. Badra's family used to live in Bīsān, whereas half of ʿAbdullah's family on his mother's side is from Yāfa, but both families already had owned a house in Nablus when they came to the city.

According to Marwa, old social traditions like the *istiqbāl* are not practiced any more, and the social bonds between people have become weaker.

Interestingly, all but the two oldest participants strongly rejected the idea of Nabulsi heritage existing apart from Palestinian heritage. Ṣadīq said Nabulsi soap was Palestinian heritage, but first and foremost, it was Nabulsi heritage, while Umm Nādā said it was exclusively Nabulsi heritage because no other Palestinian city produced soap. In all others, the view that Nabulsi heritage is a part of Palestinian heritage prevailed, and they saw it as a contribution to Palestinian heritage rather than an independent item of culture.

As noted before, divisions within Nablus are downplayed, and the awareness of Nabulsi

pride contradicts the simultaneously stated view that all of Palestine is one, which only ʿAbdullah contested in saying that Palestinian identities are very fragmented.

9.4. The best and the worst time

All participants located the best time for Nablus in the past. Significantly, the younger participants located it in a past they had only heard about from their relatives. Marwa said the best time for Nablus was before or even during the first intifāda. ʿAbīr in a similar vein locates the end of good times for Nablus in the 90s, and sees a relatively long span of good times before that, even including the 1940s. Badra names two times that were good: of the ones she has lived, it was her early childhood during the early 1990s. This is connected to her personal memories. For Nablus as a city, she thinks the 1970s or 1980s were the best times. This aligns with the views of Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq, who see a period of progress that is then cut off by a backlash in the 1990s. Only ʿAbdullah remembers the 1990s as a period of hopefulness.

According to Badra, Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq, there was progress within society, but this progress has been lost. Badra locates this time of prosperity in the 1970s and 1980s, while Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq think it was a little earlier, in the 1950s, 1960s up to the mid-1970s. People came to Nablus to study, and it was considered a prosperous and well-developed city. Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq especially see regression regarding a new and superficial religiosity. Both mentioned the headscarf and face-veil. Ṣadīq also lamented the return of the separation of the sexes and the exclusion of women from the public sphere and attributed this to a rise of the *salafiyya* in the 1980s. For Ṣadīq, the best time was from the early 1960s until the year 1966, immediately before the Israeli occupation in 1967. This was a period of stability, and education in Nablus prospered. Universities abroad also hosted many Nabulsi students and professors. The public library, the first of its kind in the Hashemite kingdom, was established. Egyptian films premiered in the cinema in Nablus at the same time they premiered in Cairo. According to Ṣadīq, the prosperity ended with the occupation, but the social regression had not yet started.

Umm Nādā and Ṣadīq thought that of the times they had not lived, the time of the Ottoman empire was a good period for Nāblus. Umm Nādā attributed this to Nablus being connected to the railway going all the way to Saudi Arabia⁶, and Ṣadīq similarly told me that prosperity was linked to pilgrims for the *ḥaġġ* coming to Nablus. Also, free travel within the Ottoman empire played a role, Umm Nādā contended, and Nablus was therefore connected to the wider area. During the British mandate, Palestine was broken up into small contesting entities, according to her.

What most people complained about was the architectural mistakes made in Nablus. They told me there was bad urban planning. Nādā said this began in 1993 with the Oslo accords. Some blamed urban planning for the deteriorating social networks. Marwa blames this on social media, although at the same time, she notices a renewed interest in old traditions.

⁶Graham-Brown contends that Nablus was only connected to the Hijaz railway shortly before WWI, in order to secure supplies for the Egyptian front. (Graham-Brown 1982:111).

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The worst time for the two youngest participants, Marwa and ʿAbīr, is now. Marwa more generally mourns the loss of social cohesion, while ʿAbīr specifically blames the Corona virus pandemic and the economic conditions it caused to deteriorate. Regardless of this, she remains optimistic for the future. For ʿAbdullah, who owns a hostel and a café, the present days are also perhaps the worst, but for him, this is not only due to the current situation, but also related to a decline in moral values and a disinterest in the cause of resistance. Badra said the worst time was the 2002 invasion, as did Ṣadīq. Nādā said the whole period from 2002 until 2009 was the worst time for Nablus. Umm Nādā did not tell me what she thinks was the worst time for Nablus. For those who told me about the invasion and its impact on their lives, it was clear that it was a difficult topic to talk about. All of them had lived through situation that made them feel scared, such as having to take her sisters home safely in the face of a tank in the case of Badra, or having to walk over the mountain where the military was to get to Nablus from Ramallah for Nādā, or the house being shelled when his sister and he were in it for Ṣadīq. Nādā told me that when the electricity was cut off, the food in the freezers was about to go bad, and people invited all their neighbours to eat together, a beautiful and terrible memory at the same time. This anecdote might have served to mediate the traumatic experience. Through the funny story of heaps of *ʿakkūb* that was cooked in every house and made the whole city smell of vegetables, an intolerable memory was sublimated.⁷

Presuming that none of the participants would have told me the time of the direct Israeli occupation that began in 1967 was a prosperous time for Nablus had the question been phrased like that, it is baffling how little it was perceived as an incision for the history of Nablus. Only Ṣadīq even mentioned this event. All agreed that it was nowhere near as bad as the re-occupation and siege of Nablus in 2002, of which some of the interviewees had vivid and horrifying memories, except for the youngest two.⁸ Indeed, a period of decline is rather seen to have happened from the Oslo agreements in 1993 until the present day. The two oldest participants mentioned Ottoman times as times of prosperity, and all participants saw the period of Jordanian rule in a relatively positive light, especially at a social level. The most common causes for viewing the present times negatively were a decline in cohesion of social relations and the covid pandemic.

⁷Cf. Kamal, op. cit.

⁸Umm Nādā did not mention this period to me.

10. Conclusion

In the wider context of Israel/Palestine, the Palestinian narrative is that of the subaltern. Looking at different regional narratives in a purely Palestinian context and zooming in on Nablus, the picture becomes more multifarious, and thereby more complicated. While in Nablus city, the Nabulsi narrative of ancient urban heritage is the dominant narrative, it is at the same time challenged by the "mountain of fire" epithet that is often invoked. This, in turn, fits within a national(ist) narrative of resistance. While many patterns of resistance are built on the traditional social fabric of the city, the role of the camps is undeniable, and they are not traditionally part of the narrative of heritage. Even though the sample is too small to draw any final conclusions, we might see a generational gap between the interviewees. The oldest ones are more focused on their city environment, despite Ṣadīq being part of the armed Palestinian resistance and living partly in Amman. The following generation, represented by Nādā and ʿAbdullah have different foci. In Nādā's view, the unity of all Palestinians is more important than regional particularities. Her notion of heritage is that each city has its particular contribution, but all heritage put forward by different cities is at its core essentially Palestinian. Nabulsi soap, in that regard, is less important as a Nabulsi thing and more as Nablus' contribution to Palestine. ʿAbdullah, on the other hand, like Ṣadīq and Nādā, has a strong focus on the Palestinian state-building project. His contribution to a Palestinian state, however, lies in strengthening the local cultural scene in his city. While Nādā fully agrees with the narrative of unity in the city, which is present both in the Palestinian and the Nabulsi narrative, in the interview with ʿAbdullah, more class and religious differences came up, which Nādā denies altogether. For the third generation, a certain detachment can be witnessed from the national narrative. It is still strong as a narrative, but not as laden with emotions. Rather, nostalgia seems to be a dominant topic, for an idealised version of their city, especially strong in Marwa. The Nabulsi narrative is weakest in them.

I chose to entitle this thesis the "slippery ground" of heritage and identity because that is the way they often presented themselves to me. Simultaneously, I also found identity to be slippery ground for my interviewees, because there are so many different factors that shape any persons's identity, and for Palestinians, they are loaded with a certain imperative nature and urgency.

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A. Appendix

A.1. Abstract

Identity is not an easy topic in the Palestinian context. The Palestinian people have no nation state that could serve as a reference point for belonging. On the contrary, creating and maintaining a shared Palestinian identity is crucial for demanding the establishment of such a state for the Palestinians, against all forces trying to wipe out a Palestinian identity to serve their own political purposes. Efforts to create national heritage that culturally unites all Palestinians resulted in a dominant nationalist narrative idolizing the peasant. After all, it is peasants who keep connection to their land, and the counter-narrative to that of the biblical ancestry that connects the Jewish citizens of Israel to historical Palestine is that of the Canaanite peasant who has always been there, longer than history can recount.

Nabulsi soap has only recently made it to the hit list of material Palestinian heritage. After all, it was a costly, bourgeois and urban endeavour to make soap in factories. To produce soap meant belonging to an urban elite. This elite was not the object of the discourse on national heritage, and neither was its produce.

The picture has changed with the uprisings against Israel. The tales of a rebellious city, known for its peaceful resistance in the first and much less peaceful resistance in the second *intifāda* are apt to enforce a nationalist symbolism. They have charged Nabulsi soap with cultural meaning. Soap is a symbol for Nablus, and the city in turn is a symbol for resistance, and resistance is seen as a defining quality of the Palestinian people.

Yet as always, there is more than one narrative, and soap has more than a single defined cultural value. The dichotomy between rural and urban is strong in Palestine. In a city that grew rapidly due to internal migration, being associated with a soap factory became synonymous with belonging to an old urban society that was original to Nablus. Even the lesser jobs in the soap factories were passed on through generations within one family, creating a network of kinship and patronage relations. The production of soap is interwoven with the city's history and continues to play a role in the cultural self-image of Nablus' people.

This means that today, we find an entangled situation and conflicting narratives around the famous Nabulsi soap. Firstly, it is an object of everyday use. Secondly, it is charged with nationalist symbolic value. And thirdly, it has a local history and may have a different symbolic value in the local context.

This thesis tries to explore the connection between tradition, heritage and the language that roots a craft in people's consciousness. It aims to see beyond the heroic tales of the city that suffers but survives, and engages with the people whose roots are so interwoven with an everyday object that carries such multifold meaning.

A.2. Kurzfassung

Die Frage nach Identität ist komplex, ganz besonders in Palästina. Die Palästinenser*innen haben keinen Staat, der einen Referenzpunkt für Zugehörigkeit darstellen könnte. Vielmehr ist es entscheidend, eine palästinensische kulturelle Identität zu schaffen, um einen solchen Staat erst denkmöglich zu machen.

Bemühungen, ein nationales Erbe zu etablieren mündeten in ein dominantes nationalistisches Narrativ, das Bauern und Bäuerinnen zu den Idolen einer physischen Verbindung zu ihrem Land erhebt. Das Gegenarrativ zum biblischen "gelobten Land", auf das sich die zionistische Bewegung beruft, ist das des kanaanitischen Bauern und der Bäuerin, die seit Urzeiten die Olivenhaine bewirtschaften, länger als die Erinnerung zurückreicht.

In den Kanon des palästinensischen Kulturerbes wurde die Nabulsi-Seife erst vor relativ kurzer Zeit aufgenommen. Ihre Erzeugung in Fabriken war historisch gesehen ein bourgeoises und urbanes Unterfangen. Seife zu produzieren bedeutete, Teil einer urbanen Elite zu sein. Diese Elite war nicht Gegenstand des Kulturerbediskurses.

Dieses Bild hat sich geändert. Die Legende von Nablus als widerständiger Stadt, bekannt für ihre Auflehnung gegen die israelische Besatzung der Stadt in der ersten und zweiten Intifāda eignet sich dazu, einen nationalistischen Symbolismus zu verstärken. Dadurch wurde die Nabulsi-Seife mit kultureller Bedeutung aufgeladen. Seife ist ein Symbol für Nablus, das wiederum symbolisch für den Widerstand steht, der identitätsstiftend für das palästinensische Volk ist.

Neben diesem offiziellen Narrativ existieren jedoch viele verschiedene Narrative parallel zueinander. Seife hat mehr als eine einzige kulturelle Bedeutung. In einer Stadt, die aufgrund interner Vertreibung rapide gewachsen ist, wurde die Arbeit in einer Seifenfabrik, unabhängig von der Position, zum Synonym für die Zugehörigkeit zur originalen urbanen Gesellschaft. Die Seifenproduktion ist bis heute verwoben mit der Geschichte und dem Schicksal der Stadt. Die Verwandtschafts- und Klientelnetzwerke, die vor hunderten von Jahren entstanden sind, spielen bis heute eine Rolle.

Das bedeutet, dass wir heute eine verwickelte Situation widersprüchlicher Narrative vorfinden, die die Nabulsi-Seife umgeben. Zunächst ist sie ein Alltagsobjekt. Dazu kommt ihre Aufladung mit nationalistischem Symbolwert. Darüber hinaus hat sie aber auch eine lokale geschichtliche Bedeutung und prägt die Identität der Bewohner*innen von Nablus.

Diese Arbeit zeigt die Verbindungen zwischen Kulturerbe und Identität und leuchtet die Diskrepanzen zwischen verschiedenen Identitätsnarrativen aus. Ihr Ziel ist es, die Legenden der heldenhaften Stadt, die leidet, aber überlebt, zu dekonstruieren und einen Blick auf die Menschen zu werfen, deren Geschichte so verflochten ist mit einem Alltagsgegenstand, der eine so facettenreiche Bedeutung trägt.

A.3. Interview questions

Arabic (transcription)¹

¹The transcription roughly represents how I speak when I speak Arabic and is not representative of Nabulsi dialect.

A. Appendix

- inta/inti wēn bi-Nāblus kbirt/kbirti? ʔindak/ ʔindik ittiṣāl ʔāṭifi la-hāda l-makān?
- šū l-makān aktar in-Nābulsi bi-n-nisba illak/illek?
- šū l-muntağ aktar in-Nābulsi bi-n-nisba illak/illek?
- lamma baʔul "ṣābūn Nābulsi", šū awwal šī yuxṭur ʔa-bālak/bālik?
- šū bimayyiz iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi?
- šū btaʔrif/btaʔrfi ʔan ahammiyyet iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi it-tārīxiyye?
- šū btaʔrif/btaʔrfi ʔan iğrāʔāt ṣināʔat iṣ-ṣābūn?
- šū btaʔrif/btaʔrfi ʔan iṣ-ṣabbānāt? wēn kānat mawğūde w ḍallat mawğūde am lā?
- tištari iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi? lēš aw lēš lā?
- iza tištariḥ, tištari mārka muʔayyane?
- istixdām iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi la-asbāb ʔāṭifiyye am ʔamaliyye?
- mīn byastaʔmil iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi?
- šū bimayyiz Nāblus ka-madīne?
- šū bimayyiz sukkān Nāblus?
- mīn al-ʔāʔilāt il-maʔrūfe li-kbīre fī Nāblus?
- btaʔrif/btaʔrfi iza kān ilhum ʔilāqa bi-ṣināʔat iṣ-ṣābūn?
- inta/inti faxūr/faxūra fī Nāblus? lēš aw lēš lā?
- šū kānat aḥsan fatra zamaniyye la-Nāblus ka-madīne?
- šū kānat aswa? fatra zamaniyye la-Nāblus ka-madīne?
- šū rāyak fī hayy il-ğumle: "iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi min it-turāt il-Filaṣṭīni."?
- šū rāyak fī hayy il-ğumle: "iṣ-ṣābūn in-Nābulsi min it-turāt in-Nābulsi."?
- bi-n-nisba illak/illek, fī farq bēn il-iṭnēn? w iza fī farq, šū huwwe?

English:

- Where in Nablus did you grow up? Do you have an emotional connection with this place?
- What is the most Nabulsi place for you?
- What is the most Nabulsi product for you?

A. Appendix

- When I say "Nabulsi soap", what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
- What makes Nabulsi soap special?
- What do you know about the historical importance of Nabulsi soap?
- What do you know about the production process?
- What do you know about the soap factories? Where were they and are they still there?
- Do you buy Nabulsi soap? Why or why not?
- If you buy it, do you buy a specific brand?
- Is the usage of Nabulsi soap for emotional or practical reasons?
- Who uses Nabulsi soap?
- What makes Nablus special as a city?
- What makes the citizens of Nablus special?
- Who are the big and well-known families in Nablus?
- Do you know if they were associated with soap production?
- Are you proud of Nablus? Why or why not?
- What was the best time for Nablus as a city?
- What was the worst time for Nablus as a city?
- What is your opinion of this sentence: "Nabulsi soap is part of Palestinian heritage."?
- What is your opinion of this sentence: "Nabulsi soap is part of Nabulsi heritage."?
- According to you, is there a difference between the two? If so, what difference?

A.4. Images

A. Appendix



Figure A.1.: A traditional cut piece of soap. Courtesy of Alnaameh Nabulsi soap company.



Figure A.2.: A modernised piece of *an-naḡāma*-soap. This piece is pressed instead of cut.

A. Appendix



Figure A.3.: A modernised version of Nabulsi soap with additional ingredients, in this case avocado. Note the change in shape and technique: This piece is pressed, not cut. Courtesy of Nabulsi soap company.



Figure A.4.: A parcel "Nablus" soap company sent me after the interview with Mojtaba Tbeleh. It came wrapped in many layers and carrying an official certificate stating its contents that allowed it to travel. It was apparent that the parcel had had quite a journey before it reached me.

A. Appendix



Figure A.5.: The contents of the parcel, both traditional soap in modern packaging and modernised soap with different scents. Both pictures courtesy of the author.

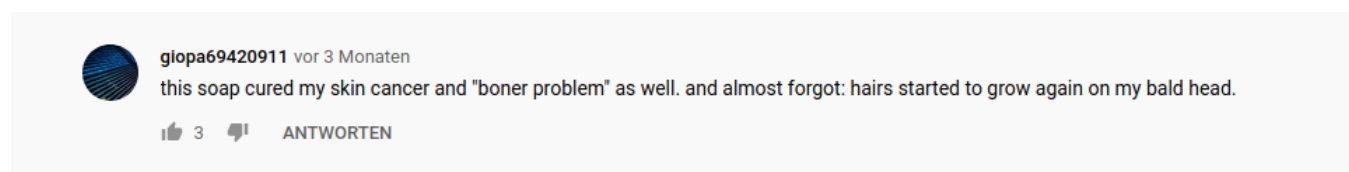


Figure A.6.: One of the many funny and strange comments on Youtube videos about soap production that I did not want to withhold from the reader. It could not be determined what kind of a "boner problem" Nabulsi soap cures.