Urban & Spatial Development in Glocal Palestine: The Case of Rawabi

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Abstract

The different settlement strategies of the late century and the violence of the ongoing conflicts are reflected in urban and rural landscapes, leading to situations where any previous identity of place seems to have been lost. This covers not only the surface of territorial confusions, beneath the current urban sprawl by ancient structures of the deep-seated history of Palestine, lines of force for the present landscape. Even today the urban pattern mostly follows the ancient corridor of connection, today fragmented by several cuts. While, in about one century, no new towns were founded, during the last decades, with the significant population growth, more than five hundred small villages have spread spontaneously, but often without any primary services, while hundreds of new Israeli settlements, leaving the emergence of new global practices, further weakened the condition of urban services and infrastructure networks. Since 1967 the absence of any Palestinian local plan highlighted the unbalanced planning with the Israeli side, a globalized context with a long urbanization process. Some existing overcrowded cities underwent uncontrolled expansion and urban sprawl, compromising the cultural heritage sites and the agricultural sector, strategic not only economically, but even for the identity and the cultural roots of the country. Over the last years, under the PNA government, housing and infrastructure projects witnessed major developments, focusing both on existing cities - for increasing the functional vocation of each one and the density within built-up areas - as well as on new towns. Rawabi, the first city planned under the Palestinian Authority, is an example where to investigate the hybrid character of "glocal" in today's Palestine, where the traditional relations of the origin of the village, the strongest element of identity, merge together with a new sense of urban identity. By considering some cases of spatial and urban transformations, this paper would try to investigate the cultural impact of social and economic globalization on the Palestinian landscape, as well as the relation between local culture and a modern character that, framed in global urban dimensions and related to the Israeli occupation, is sometimes unable to meet the real needs.

Keywords: Glocal dimension, urban history, cultural heritage, modernization, local tradition, occupation, globalization

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Since the Industrial Revolution human population has grown from 1 to 7 billion and the fastest growth rate was registered in urban environments. The diverse stylistic influences and intercultural dialogue that emerged, demonstrate that the huge population flows played a focal role in the progressive broadening of cultural horizons, by shaping urban and rural landscapes at the global level.

All these aspects are most evident in the Near Eastern cities, where the contradictory coexistence of several cultures, and, within a politically contested territory, results in spaces shared among different races, programs and ideologies.

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Today's Palestine is a paradigm of the last rapid changes that, with the intensifying of flows and new ways of living, moving, consuming and communicating, whether real or virtual, have become integral parts of the global reality, going beyond the national boundaries and territorial limits of a fragmented sovereignty.

From the social point of view, the glocal dimension is thus related to understanding the plural realities that shape the city, while for the economical aspect it should concern the different ways in which new technological tools, means of production and consumption evolve along with the development of globalization in each particular local context. All these practices find their expression in cities and in the relationships between cities: the global network of cities, considered not any more as several nation states but as networks of polycentric metropolitan areas, is becoming the new form of governance, where the social and economic impact of globalization intersects, sometimes clashing, with the local culture.

Rawabi, the first new town planned under the Palestinian Authority and currently under construction, could be an opportunity to investigate the territorial and urban dimension of glocal in today's Palestine, whose character is directly influenced by political, social and economic evolutions. This town is located along the main north-south urbanized axis of Palestine, a few kilometers north of Ramallah. The official documents emphasize the highly innovative character of the project, breaking away from old urban traditions: a hi-tech city for 40,000 inhabitants, with cinemas, shopping malls, schools, landscaped walkways, office blocks, a conference centre, a Roman style amphitheater, a stadium, a water park and, in the town center, a piazza lined with arcades, restaurants and cafes.

The city center should become a hub of business and high tech, attracting services sector enterprises, stimulating the banking sector and generating several thousands employment opportunities for Palestinians. The opportunity for public private cooperation, generated by the plan, as well as the possibility of mortgages, should revive the Palestinian economy, creating stability across society.

In the eyes of the promoters Rawabi should be the right answer, both for the chronic problem of housing shortage and for the increasing unemployment, also related to the high rates of poverty while the total population grew by 20% in 1998-2005, the poverty rate increased by three times. In 2010 the unemployment rate in the West Bank reached 17.2% while in Israel it was just 6.6% (WEF). Most workers are unskilled workers and the unemployment rate for higher education graduates has reached 23%, leading many young Palestinian professionals to emigrate to the Gulf States, EU or USA.

From the Israeli point of view, the project on Rawabi is very well accepted, as the potential economic development triggered by this new town in the region could even contribute to Israel's security. Nevertheless, obviously there are several serious obstacles caused by the Israeli occupation: a section of road connecting Rawabi to Ramallah runs through Israeli-controlled Area C, creating problem in agreements between the two parts; the Israeli military checkpoint existing between Rawabi and Ramallah, to protect the Hebrew settlement Atseret, is also a serious problem considering that, if closed, it could block access to the outside world. Water is another challenge depending from Israel, that controls almost all water supplies with a significant unbalanced distribution; according to The Guardian, 600,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem consume almost six times as much water as 2.7 million Palestinians.

Rawabi has been the opportunity to open a debate among those geared to the founding of new suburban towns and those who promote a total absorption in existing cities, through specific plans for Metropolitan Development.


Interviews with Palestinian professionals and academics have often revealed critical opinions about the project: although it could help to block the development of the nearby Israeli settlement of Aparat, Rawabi is considered a purely commercial project, based on planning principles from abroad, strongly linked to the private sector and unable to meet the local needs. Moreover, Rawabi doesn’t add any new productive economic development to the nation, because there are no factories in the city. Other critical issues would be that the professionals involved are mostly foreign people and the target of potential buyers, being mainly referred to the wealthy/middle-class, would seriously increase the division into social classes, further worsening the already critical condition of the weaker ones. From the planning point of view Rawabi, alone, does not solve the issue of high rate of population growth and, considering that many of the future inhabitants will be commuters, it risks creating an additional satellite city dependent on Ramallah, further increasing urban sprawl in the area.

In Occupation District, R. Shehadeh brings out some profound contradictions related to the unbalanced distribution of inhabitants in the West Bank: the village of Bir Nabala was once a commercial center on the main road connecting Jerusalem to Ramallah. With the construction of the wall, this village was cut off from the city and made accessible just from Ramallah through a tunnel connecting just the Jewish settlements and forbidden to the Arabs. Bir Nabala today is full of empty apartments, while the nearby Ramallah is overcrowded. In Shehadeh’s view, the Palestinian Authority should put pressure on the Israelis in order to abandon their plans for exploitation of the land, rather than build a new town to house just 40,000 Palestinian middle classes that could have easily found a home in the villages surrounding Ramallah. Another contrast, highlighted by Shehadeh, is between the 40,000 inhabitants of Rawabi, who will live in 6,800 units of land and 100,000, the refugee camp north of Ramallah, where 13,000 people live in just 253 dunums.

According to Dr. Rami Narullah, founder and head of IPPC The International Peace and Cooperation Center, in the Palestinian culture the village of origin still represents the strongest element of identity: when its inhabitants move elsewhere, in another village or town, they always remain in the vicinity of the place of origin and tend to settle in parts of the city inhabited only by them.

In such cultural context, Rawabi should lay the foundations for a more open culture, where the traditional relations of the village of origin, could evolve into a sense of urban identity.

In my opinion, there are several innovative aspects in this project, aimed at the development of a global urban dimension: more than half of those who have signed contracts have taken out long-term mortgages, still rare in the Arab world and particularly in Palestine; this fact could finally dispel apprehension of long-term loans, encouraging new investment. A high proportion of them are young nuclear families, not extended classes, as in which the mother works outside. Seven percent of Rawabi homeowners, so far, are single professional women who plan to live alone, unusual in Palestinian society, 11% are Christian (compared with 2% of the Palestinian population); a small proportion are also buying as investment for rental or future resale, while 4% of buyers are Palestinian expatriate. Apart from the economic position, the future social structure seems therefore to be quite diversified. Besides, the significant presence of leisure structures would lead Palestinians to develop a new approach for which life is not anymore confined to the home.

In its architectural design Rawabi features mainly a Western-style architecture defined by modern, streamlined and hi-tech apartments, built for Palestinian families who want to leave their chaotic and overcrowded West Bank cities. Many critics state that any promotion of the rich cultural heritage of Palestinian urban landscapes is completely absent. Rawabi is considered as a suburb with the hilltop-grabbing spatial city planning of an Israeli settlement, similar in terms of construction, including rowhouses and reliance on brick, also used for the Israeli settlements: “The architecture of Rawabi represents the colonial imitation of the colonizer”.

Shehadeh expresses a significant standpoint on the project: “There are already hundreds of villages around Ramallah and then, what is the need to found a new one? Why not expand existing ones, keeping the urban development in harmony with the contours of the hills?”

Contaminating lands to erode the top of the hills and destroying the landscape, we are only imitating the Israeli actions, which for decades we criticize. (…) After seeing Rawabi, once a terraced hill planted with olive trees, I understood the ramifications of our defeat. (…) Rather than struggling to earn our space and affirm our lifestyle, we copy the colonizers and use the same destructive methods that ruin our land and its natural heritage. It looks like a race between those who can inflict the most damage in the shortest period of time. (…) How attractive was the old village of Ajlou, next to Rawabi and how strong was the contrast with that sterile monstrosity, erected on hills that were destroyed specially for this purpose? 8

However, it is also useful to frame Rawabi in the broader scenario of planning experiences, affecting the today’s Arab world, with different outcomes, between global and local dimension. As also stated by Attillio Perna, contemporary architectural culture is no longer based on that collective spontaneous subconscious and critical social conscience that had built city form for centuries. One experience, directly related to this architectural crisis, can be found in the Gulf cities that, having grown very fast from the sixties, developed on the British and American urban models, defined by extreme vertical buildings and anonymous containers for services and commercial activities: the resulting urban fabric, divided and segmented, has lost its identity and the organic nature of the traditional city, allowing the development of new images, totally decontextualized, like the Palm Island of Dubai.

Other cases, with similar outcomes but different relation with the local heritage, could be found in the Egyptian village of Sharm el Sheikh: from Israeli military operation has been converted into an exclusive tourist center, or in the Andromeda Hill complex, a gated community with a picturesque view on the port, aimed to express the symbolic and mythical vision of old legendary Jaffa. Its architectural structures, as well as many hotels in Sharm el Sheikh, try to recall a kind of Mediterranean-Arab style, but this reference to the local past heritage is just formal, empty of significance and not related to the identity of the different communities.

Another case is that of the old Muristan, a fortress built in Ramallah after the Revolt of 1836 and later used as the headquarters of Arafat after his death, a mausoleum was built there in his honor but, according to many opinions, this project was realized by ignoring what this place, by then part of the local heritage, meant for the collective memory of the Palestinians.

On the opposite way, the British master plans for Jerusalem during the Mandate period were based on the preservation of local history that was just seen as the biblical, oriental, romantic nature of the old city. European concepts of architectural conservation played a decay role, considering the romantic view of biblical Jerusalem, as a timeless Holy City, a large monument steeped in biblical meaning and far from its real nature of a living urban entity, part of a larger hankerdland.

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1Ahmad Melhem is a Palestinian journalist September 17, 2014 Al Meestur.
2Rai Shehabudeh, op. cit.
3Professor of Landscape Architecture, specialized in investigations related to the study of the Arab world.
A better result was obtained in the regeneration of some ancient Arab villages, such as Ein Hod or Ein Karem, among others, merging traditional and modern architecture in significant results of glocal style, always based on strong preexistences with a clear identity. Despite this, going beyond the architectural aspects, such projects have tried to totally erase the collective memory of the local Arab culture, belonging to the previous inhabitants.

Even the forlorn new towns built in the fifties could be a useful comparison of many of them had been filled with large flows of immigrants and inhabited only by tenants, creating serious social and economical problems, even today unsolved; some of these new towns became bedroom communities, lacking any first economic base for the new inhabitants.

**Planning Experiences in Twentieth century Palestine**

In light of these last considerations, how to act, combining global and local, in the design of a new town, both by improving the quality of life through a clever use of space, good connection between poles, modern facilities and technologies, and both by preserving the historical identity of the cultural heritage of Palestine.

Since the 19th century, urban development and planning in Palestine went through several phases, mostly characterized by the control of external forces, which seriously affected the present territorial structure. The rapid increase of the West Bank population and territorial changes that followed the War of 1948 began to seriously affect the identity of the place.

While, in about one century, no new towns were founded, existing crowded cities and refugee camps underwent uncontrolled expansion and urban sprawl more than five hundred small villages spread spontaneously on any kind of master plan or primary services, resulting in a widespread and random settlement structure; hundreds of new Israeli settlements further worsened the conditions of urban services and infrastructure networks.

Under the Jordanian control nothing was made to develop any urban plan and nothing changed since 1967, under the Israeli occupation, highlighting rather the unbalanced planning with the Israeli side, a globalized context with a long urbanization process, and compromising the cultural heritage sites together with the agricultural sector.

Since the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1994, the built-up area of existing crowded cities has almost doubled, along with the significant population growth and the daily migration of the residents from the nearby villages. Today the total population in Palestine is 4.42 million people, while in 1990 it was just 2.8 million and it is expected to grow to 6 million in 2025. Palestine is one of the most densely populated places in the Arab world, at 715 persons/qkm in 2012 (with 4,505 persons/qkm in Gaza Strip and 468 persons/qkm in West Bank).

This high rate of growth would clearly represent a great asset to the country, but in the absence of adequate policies, an excessive amount of people would clash with the reduced size and resources of the current Palestinian territory, fragmented by separation walls and checkpoints.

However, mainly due to the changing and unstable political situation, even this rapid urbanization of last decades under the PNA mismanagement of planning and management, leading to uncontrolled city expansions and diffusion of urban sprawls within the cities; this, also flanked by a significant increase of scattered villages and rural communities, further highlighted the inefficiency of public transport sector, as also proved by the prevalence of private cars (65% of the total transport system) with consequent increase of congestion and environmental pollution. The Oslo Agreement, with the division of the West Bank into A, B and C areas, severely limited available land, mostly concentrated in area C, pushing cities to expand vertically and worsening the housing shortage problem, resulting with an average of 6.4 people per housing unit.

The unchecked urban and industrial growth is even a threat to landscapes, cultural and archaeological heritage, agricultural lands, and environment.

In addition to its important economic role, the agricultural sector also contributes to the identity and cultural roots of the Country. Since 1993 the percentage of rural population in Palestine has dropped from 32% to 25%; however, it is still among the highest levels compared to a global scenario. Currently there is a potential for development also limited by the lack of water and land resources. Because of the hot climate and the little amount of rain in the Jordan valley, about 30% of the cultivated land is irrigated land, while 70% is salted. This is also worsened by the general inadequacy of water, electricity and sewage infrastructure: in many cases the villages depend mainly on seepage and cesspools and most of the collected wastewater is disposed of in open areas, agricultural areas, and wells.

Over the last years, under the PNA government, housing and infrastructure projects witnessed major developments, focusing on new towns and on existing cities, as well as on the improvement of the existing road network through the planning of new infrastructures. Nevertheless, the instability due to the occupation has prevented such development.

The Regional Plan of 1995 proposed to strengthen the three main longitudinal axes, focusing on the central ridge through the creation of administrative centers along it, while also increasing urban development along the two lateral axes defined by the east and west, for both political and environmental reasons. Their connection would be guaranteed by the improvement of two east-west roads, one as the natural extension of Jerusalem, while the other parallel to the north. The project also aimed to consolidate the strategic role of each area, as well as to develop transport routes between Jerusalem, Petah and the Egyptian pyramids.

The historical central ridge, with its intense urban conurbation, became then the main issue with the Acre Project, a research begun in 2003 by the \*RAND Corporation\* for a future Palestinian State with more than 6 million people, focused on the creation of a high-speed transport infrastructure corridor made by a fast railroad track, connecting Gaza with Jenin in 30 minutes, flanked by a highway, a toll road for trucks, as well as water, electricity, gas and telecommunication lines. In correspondence of the cities there would be several central stations surrounded by medium district centers and secondary transport systems, as links between the stations, the historic cores and the western rural landscapes. The eastern barren and empty areas of the Jordan valley would be revived with new residential areas and modern technological and industrial clusters; while the western part would be related to archaeological and cultural heritage, traditional agriculture and natural sites.

\*\[\text{See A.V.V. Beyond the Arab awakening: Policies and investments for poverty reduction and food security; International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, DC, 2012.}\]


\*\[\text{Cf. Urban Development and Planning in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: Impact on Urban Form, Dr. Ali Abdallahm, All Soldier Samara, An Najah National University, 2006.}\]

\*\[\text{The \*RAND Corporation\* is a non-profit institution consisting of a think tank from several disciplines.}\]

\*\[\text{Cf. Towards sustainable planning and development in Palestine, Khalid Hezanieh, 2010. Cf. also A.V.V., The are a formal structure for a Palestinian state, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2005.}\]
According to some opinions\(^1\), this project shows several weak points, considering that the infrastructural axis, creating a deep rift in landscape, promotes an unbalanced development just for the main cities along the central ridge; 50% of the population is dispersed in hundreds of villages and much of the region is left to geopolitical risk, without any plan for the development of existing cities or new settlements.

The Arc Project has been partly considered for the subsequent strategic plan of MOP, defined The Last aimed at improving the central north-south urbanized route up to become, as a result, a continuing Arc from Gaza until the borders designed to accommodate a significant population increase in the long term (50 million inhabitants by 2100); all这也 provides the model of two secondary urban axes: in a future redistribution of water, the eastern axis would develop its agricultural vocation, while the western axis, along the border with Israel, should promote an intense urbanization. A network of regional centers, defined in both existing cities and by new towns, would be developed following a complete coverage of the national territory; all scattered villages could become suburbs within a range of 15 kilometers from the closest urban center and their fertile agricultural lands would be developed by enhancing rainwater collection and economizing on water consumption. Each existing city would increase its density, preventing uncontrolled urban sprawl, as well as its functional vocation; for Jenin, Qalqilya and Tulkarm the main vocation could be agriculture and commerce; Nablus would improve its role as a commercial and educational center; the main activity of Hebron is related to industry and administrative center; while Beitlehem and Jenisho, with their archeological and cultural heritage, are mainly identified as touristic centers\(^2\). Congested cities such as Nablus would develop decentralization strategies creating smaller satellite centers.

Over the last years the PNA started a new phase of planning, leading to the National Development Plan (NDP) 2011 - 2035\(^3\), where the highest priority remains the independent State of Palestine, based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as capital. In this vision, PNA developed a master plan for a national railroad linking historic cities to Jordan Valley and then to the railways of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as well as a light rail connecting Gaza and West Bank. Also, new neighborhoods are under construction in many cities, as well as housing programs with affordable mortgage financing.

In the last years some planning strategies were also developed, in relation with possible peace scenarios with Israel, considering shared needs and the integration between Palestinian and Israeli networks.

A recent project, following this approach, regards the plan for al-Laja, a future Arab town to be developed in northern Israel, on the site where a village of the same name stood until 1948: the housing is planned to be Wexner-style, for serving modern requirements, but the town center is planned in the traditional Palestinian style, with low buildings, domes, stones and cobbles. What is significant is that the plan, embracing a future of coexistence, foresees an industrial zone developed as joint project with Jewish communities, in order to strengthen the local economy through the influence and interaction with a external economies for the building of a more global economic dimension.

The Longue Durée: Looking the Past for Building the Future Glocal Dimension

The different political and settlement strategies of the late century and the violence of the ongoing conflicts were reflected on urban and rural landscapes, leading to situations where any previous identity of place seemed to have been lost.\(^3\)

\(^1\)Interview with Ahmad Safi, Director of National Spatial Planning, MOP Ministry of Planning.
\(^2\)Interview with Ahmad Safi, Op. Cit.
\(^3\)The National Development Plan 2011-2035, Establishing the State, Building our Future, PNA Ministry of Planning and Administrative Development, April 2011.
The urban layout of these ancient cities represents various historical moments: the roman traces of cardo, decumanus, theatres, hippodromes and gymnasia, merge together with narrow lanes, stone houses, arches, mosques, shrines and hammams. Here, geography of religion and trade merge together in a mutual compensation, as still well readable through the presence of grinders, saks, soap factories, oil and wheat mills, orange warehouses, food industries, khans and fountains along the main urban routes, as well as cisterns, belonging to different communities. Also the role of sunlight, a key element of Islamic architecture, is still well readable in these old cities, as a guide to the hierarchy of spaces filtered from bright light to darker from the squares, where light and heat prevent the associative life, passing through the bazaars, where the amount of light, coming from the overhanging roofs, is defined according to the importance and the section of every road, until reaching the blinds cul de sac that lead to the private sphere of the houses, where only the owner knows how to move.

The built environment of many of these ancient Islamic cities has a unique architectural quality, able to meet the social, cultural and economic needs of its inhabitants, integrating urban development with their lifestyle. In the light of such a great rooted culture, planning for a future global dimension, both in existing and new towns, should then be led by an opposite approach which, unlike the globalized current trends, would seek its design principles from a thorough understanding of the old urban fabric and its evolution, retrieving a layered structure that allowed the permanence of a certain architecture over time and finally wisely merging such rich and consolidate local culture with international and modern structures. Actually the project of Ramallah still presents many deficiencies under this point of view. Nonetheless, as stated by N. Feldman in his analysis, Ramallah has emotional resonance, because it draws on the traditions of aesthetic utopia, a fact on the ground that contradicts the apparent impossibility of peace; in the absence of a peace agreement, it is being built as though peace has already arrived. In this sense then Ramallah is not a solution, but it is a start⁶; of course it could be a long process, as often happens when actions depend also on external forces, in this case the Israeli occupation, but it’s very important to start laying this groundwork.

Such process, given the best results, should also develop in conjunction with the promotion of the greatest social wealth in Palestine, that is related to its Human Development Index (HDI): Palestinian HDI is 0.67 (the country’s rank is 180 out of 185 countries), calculated with respect to three parameters, health, education and income. However, while income shows a very low value, health and education are quite higher. Moreover Palestine has an extremely young population: in 2011 people in the 0-14 year age group was 42% of the total population, while people over 65 years was just 2.9%. Also the annual average growth rate of population, compared with Europe for example, shows very good data, being in 2000-2011 +2.7%.

Human capital in Palestine, with so many highly educated and underemployed young people, is then by far the greatest and most precious Palestine’s socio-economic asset. Such richness, if well directed with appropriate investment in education and with incentives to keep young people in the country, could complete the picture outlined above, leading the Palestinian Territories towards a future social and urban development, built through an innovative knowledge-based economy.

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⁶°What Pope Francis Missed in Palestine | May 27, 2014 Noah Feldman
⁶°In the HDI, people in 0-14 year age is 16%, people over 65 is 16% and the growth rate is +0,4 (HDI).