

Shopping for your country

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During the Second Intifada, the Palestinian uprising, Nablus was known as the "Capital of Terror." Armed gangs controlled the city's streets and sent suicide bombers into Israel. The Israeli army conducted incursions every night. Nine years after chaos and war owned its streets, Nablus has returned to its former role as the economic engine of the West Bank. Nowadays, citizens are encouraged to shop, not fight their way out of occupation. Terror has given way to a cautious air of normalcy, but nobody knows how long the lull will last.

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Leaving Nablus used to be a brute test of patience. People crowded into packed lines stretching out in the unforgiving sun, waiting for a bunch of Israeli soldiers to body search them and let them through. This was Hawara, one of more than 100 roadblocks and checkpoints erected by the Israeli army to pacify Nablus and environs, the most troublesome district of the occupied West Bank. For Israelis this barrier was a safeguard for their hinterland. To Palestinians it became a symbol of Israeli oppression and daily humiliation.

All this now seems to lie in the past. A new stretch of road circumvents the unused shack that once housed the checkpoint. A bored Israeli woman soldier waves Palestinians cars through, not even bothering to check who sits in the car. Since June, access to Nablus is almost unimpeded. The right-wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has removed dozens of checkpoints and roadblocks.

Nablus, which the Israeli army once termed "the Capital of Terror," is rising from the ashes. Change is everywhere. The posters that used to celebrate those who had died fighting the Israelis have been replaced by colorful advertisements for American chewing gum. The small and winding alleys of the old suq, once the site of fierce battles, are now congested with throngs of potential buyers examining merchandise in overflowing market stalls. Not long ago, armed gangs fought for primacy and protection money, and murder went unpunished. Today, tidy policemen wearing shiny army boots regulate traffic and reprimand drivers who fail to buckle up. Nablus has become a new paradigm for what a normal life could look like even in the occupied West Bank.

Jamal Muhaisen, governor of the Nablus district, is one of those responsible for this change. He put an end to chaos using a honeyed tongue and an iron fist. "The armed gangs even used to sit in my very office," remembers the governor. Pacifying the city has not been easy for the man appointed by the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas. Since Muhaisen began tackling the bands, his car has been torched several times and he has received many death threats. Five heavily armed bodyguards watch over the entrance to his office.

It did not suffice to bring in several hundred US-trained special police forces to solve the problem. Muhaisen also had to win a rhetorical battle. The gangs portrayed themselves as patriots fighting for Palestinian independence; they extolled the weapons they used to extort local businesses as "holy arms of resistance." But Muhaisen succeeded in turning the

tables. "The Israelis want chaos. That enables them to do whatever they want with us," he claims. He declared every armed gang member a traitor to the Palestinian cause and shifted the struggle's focus. Now, all around the city, posters of "martyrs in the fight against Israel" are slowly fading in the summer sun. The only new placard can be found at the entrance to the governor's building. It is modeled after the heroic cult of the gangs, but instead of showing a fighter of resistance against Israel, it points to a new enemy. It depicts a PA-policeman killed in a gunfight with Islamists in the nearby city of Qalqilyah in May this year. This turnaround has enjoyed broad support from a war-weary populace and an impoverished business community. Now Nablus is reaping the fruit. Once Muhaisen proved he can deliver law and order, the army began to make concessions. Roadblocks have been removed, and nighttime raids, once a regular phenomenon, have ceased almost completely.

The battle against the gangs appears to have been won. Governor Muhaisen and Mayor Adly Yaish have set their eyes on a new task. They want to rid their city of its image as the West Bank's largest open-air prison and to return to business as usual. To this end they organized a month-long shopping festival. Palestinians are now encouraged to use their wallets, not their weapons, to serve their homeland. In quiet coordination with the Israeli army, the PA has brought in tens of thousands of Palestinians from the surrounding areas to revive the downtrodden city center with a patriotic shopping spree. Even Arabs with Israeli citizenship are allowed to enter Nablus, something unthinkable just one year ago. Prime Minister Salam Fayad, who opened the festival, even witnessed an achievement that made it into the Guinness World Records: Nablus baked the world's largest knafe, a traditional Arab dessert of noodles and sweet goat cheese: "It weighed 1,700 kilograms and was 75 meters long," Mayor Yaish proudly says. The almost 100,000 visitors gobbled it up in less than 20 minutes.

The city of commerce is back in business. For years, the bullet-riddled glass façade of the municipal mall, its office space falling into ruin, bore witness to the ongoing struggle. Today, new merchandise gleams behind pristine windowpanes, proudly reflecting the midday sun. A new cinema opened in June. For seven dollars per ticket local residents can enjoy a foreign movie for the first time in nine years. "People are excited," says sound engineer Nadar Ilawi, who screens Egyptian and American movies five times a day. The 175 seats are almost always sold out. Even teenage girls can afford the relatively cheap tickets, and dally here without their parents. Nearby, business is booming in the alleys of the suq, and clothier Nabil is radiant: "Business has not been this good in nine years."

On the fourth floor of a modern office building, a new generation of Palestinians is trying to make a living the modern way. "We are completely on-line, our technology is completely up to date," says Ahmad Aweidah, the young CEO of the privately owned Palestinian Securities Exchange (PSE). The PSE is still in its infancy. Seventy employees handle 38 registered companies; trading volume averages just \$5 million a day. But Aweidah's aims are ambitious nonetheless. He not only wants to attract foreign investors, but also to change his people's mentality. "About 15 percent of the money comes from abroad. But we are not begging for, it as 'poor victims of occupation.' We want to be taken seriously." With an impeccable British accent, this internationally trained banker does not talk about development aid but investment and high returns. "This year alone our index has gained 13 percent. In the crisis of 2008, our stock exchange was the most stable in the Arab world."

People like Aweidah appreciate the change the new Israeli policy has brought to their lives. Only two years ago Aweidah had to smuggle himself into Nablus, since Israel did not allow Arab residents of Jerusalem to enter the city. "We used to sneak up a hill until we got to a fence. There we would wait for the Israeli patrols to pass; then we would climb over and run in our suits until we'd find the donkey carts that would take us down into the city," Aweidah recounts. In the evenings, he would have to take the same clandestine route back home. Today he can simply take his limousine and park it right in front of the sparkling, air-conditioned office building where he works. "Of course, this costs me less time, and less nerves."

In spite of this palpable change, Nablus citizens' are weary and not necessarily satisfied, the young businessman notes. In the past ten years, the Palestinian economy has contracted by 40 percent. Even with the current improvements, conditions are far from what they were in Nablus' pre-Intifada heyday. "This can only be a first step," warns Aweidah. He insists that shopping sprees will not supplant the Palestinians' national ambitions. "The Israelis should not delude themselves into thinking that our problems are economic; they are political. We do not want permits to pass through checkpoints, but complete freedom. Only a comprehensive treaty and full independence can lead to lasting peace."

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