

# Architecture as an agency of resilience in urban armed conflicts

## The case of Nablus City/Palestine

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – Contemporary wars are continuously striking population centres across the globe with devastating consequences of destruction and annihilation, and leading to mass casualties within civilians. The purpose of this paper is to question the role of architecture and urban tissue in packing up civilians' resilience and survival practices during urban warfare.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The investigation is based on critical spatial analysis of survival narratives obtained from an empirical study conducted in the city of Nablus in Palestine.

**Findings** – This paper shows that, due to its unique and highly complex socio-spatial entanglement, the *kasbah* of Nablus represents a paradigm in the (re)creation of community resilience. This paradigm is based on the interaction of three main elements: a multi-layered urban tissue accumulated along 2,000 years of urban evolution; a thick matrix of cultural and social constructs; and the lifting and switching of a lot of social conventions related to space during times of war.

**Originality/value** – The agency of architecture in supporting civilian survival practices during urban warfare is visited, nevertheless only partially unpacked by a number of prominent studies. This paper provides a deeper level of investigation and understanding of the interplay between the architecture of the city and resilience capacity.

**Keywords** Resilience, Armed conflict, Architecture of resistance, Civil resistance, Nablus, Urban warfare

**Paper type** Research paper

More and more cities around the globe are becoming the target, the object and the stage of warfare. In the last few decades, war not only entered the city, but also its schools, supermarkets and living rooms (Graham, 2004; Barakat, 1998). Increasingly scholars in the field agree on the opinion that, using John Spencer's (2019)[1] words, "political violence is now an urban phenomenon, and will only become more so". This "urban phenomenon" drives armies to rethinking concepts and principles that determine their strategies and tactics. The geographer Stephen Graham (2004) describes as a "shadow world", an expanding "intellectual field" of military urban research that concentrates on rethinking military operations in urban terrain.

In 2014, the US Army conducted a year-long research project on warfare in megacities. Spencer and Amble (2019) argue that current and future urban warfare not only attacks megacities, but also medium and small centres, with each typology of settlement requiring a unique approach. According to them, the US Army should prepare to wars in cities like Caracas in Venezuela, Sanaa in Yemen, Karachi in Pakistan, Suez in Egypt and many others, mainly located in the Global South.



Contemporary urban battles in the Middle East witnessed the involvement of new, or renewed, tactics by non-state war fighters. For example, the battle in Raqqa, Syria, against ISIS in 2017 was described as taking place in two cities, one above ground and one below (Postings, 2018). The same challenge of underground network was faced by the Israeli Army in the “Operation Protective Edge” against Gaza in 2014 (Niksch, 2017). Combat in several cities in the recent years have also involved a widespread use of snipers, armed drones, IEDs, suicide vehicle-borne IEDs, remote-controlled weapons, in addition to multiple camouflaging techniques like the “murder holes” for snipers or hung sheets between buildings to hide movement and weapons (Postings, 2018).

This urbanisation of warfare drags the civilians to be the main victims of war, and this poses an essential question regarding the resilience capacity of urban population. Though a remarkable body of literature on urban resilience is being produced, the vast majority of it tackles the risks of climate change and undermines war as an imminent threat (Campanella and Godschalk, 2012). Moreover, this body of literature discusses mainly the capacity of cities to rebound and survive a trauma, but not how residents survive and make living in times of crisis.

However, recent scholarly literature in different fields tackling civilians’ living conditions during urban combat has grown considerably over the past few years (Hallward *et al.*, 2017). Literature on urbicide focusses on political violence exerted by the state and non-state forces, within or against the city, which strives to the discipline and control inhabitant’s rights to the city (Graham, 2004; Coward, 2008). Other studies focussed on the use of architectural artefacts in oppressing and controlling the everyday of urban population (Weizman, 2007). Nurhan Abujidi (2014), in her analysis on urbicide in Palestine, attempted to analyse the deliberate destruction of the urban spaces and buildings as a means of collective punishment and re-making of national identity. Recent literature concentrated more on inhabitants’ resistance or resilience practices during urban warfare: central to this is the Palestinian case. Sahera Bleibleh (2014) took an anthropological approach to document and analyse the community’s response to the Israeli invasion of the city of Nablus in 2002. Considering the same study case, Noura Kamal (2015) conducted a socio-cultural investigation that lead to the understanding that the agency to recreate a social space in circumstances full of uncertainty and continuous violence is a core strategy for civilians’ resilience.

In his comprehensive analysis of civil resistance to urbicide and urban warfare in the Middle East, Bruce Stanley (2017) concluded that “civil resistance is both a cry and a demand”, arguing that the understanding of cities as “precarious wholes, assembled daily from diverse combinations of networks of relations among people, objects, spaces, symbols, machines, regulations and rules” allows civil resistance to develop an agency within the city itself.

This paper pursues to add one more dimension to this body of literature by focussing primarily on the agency of architecture in the civilians’ resilience/resistance practices. Taking the invasion of Nablus city in Palestine by Israeli Army in 2002 as a study case, the essay will provide a closer understanding as to how the practice of resistance/resilience becomes an urban process that implies a reinterpretation of the urban spaces.

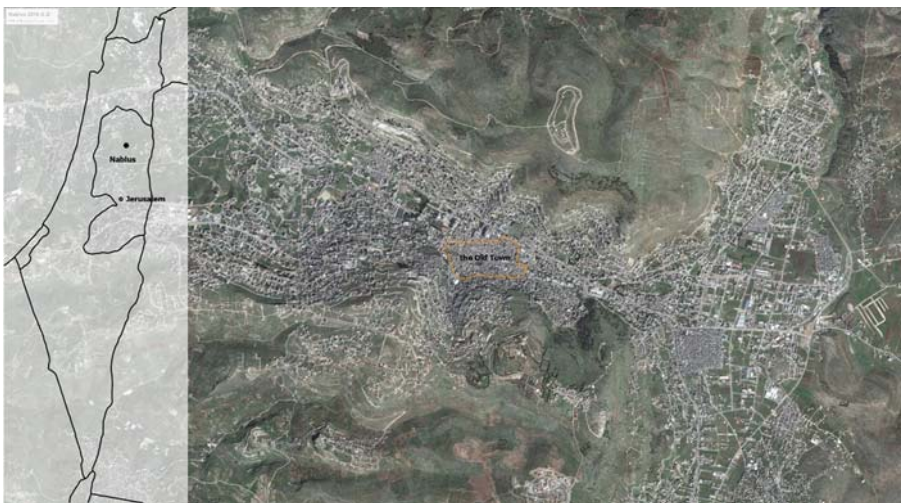
The invasion of Nablus city in Palestine in April 2002 by the Israeli Army was an extreme urban crisis. Though relatively short in time, this urban battlefield concentrated all together on the experiences of most urban battles: street fighting, house to house capturing, disrupting urban functions, targeting relief workers, killing, injuring and segregating civilians from the reach of rescues. On the rebound, the invasion elicited resilience, pushing the local community to rearrange its own human and material resources into a complex system of services and practices aimed at creating liveable conditions and back-up the everyday living of households despite, and throughout, the conflict. The battle, with all its traumas, was simultaneously a moment of birth, a reconfirmation and regeneration of community bonds; a generator of unity and solidarity, with the peculiar architectural features of the *kasbah* playing a crucial role in supporting and shaping the counter agency and inventive skills of civilians.

This paper dialogues with Rebecca Solnit’s concept of “paradise built in hell” and Samuel Henry Prince’s conceptualisation of crisis as a generative moment. According to Solnit (2010), during urgencies, “most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones”. This resonates with Prince’s 1920 dissertation, “Catastrophe and social change”, where the author asserts that crisis generates social and political changes, reminding that the word “crisis” “is of Greek origin, meaning a point of culmination and separation, an instant when change one way or another is impending” where “old customs crumble, and instability rules”. This emergence of Solnit’s “paradise”, and the point of culmination described by Prince, entails a shift in a set of rules; regular social conventions are broken, spatial codes are replaced by suspension codes and the meaning of the space is re-interpreted.

The contents presented in this publication are part of a doctoral research addressing the agency of space in civilians survival practices; the paper elaborates on the data collected in the field between 2014 and 2016, by interpolating ethnographic research, surveys and 50 interviews of local inhabitants who experienced the Israeli invasion of the city for continuous 19 days. The narratives were spatially represented and analysed on three-dimensional models, so to have a comprehensive understanding of the agency of architecture in their survival practices. According to the empirical data collected through the field investigations, such reinterpretation is here articulated in three major types of spaces: nodes, sneaks and edges.

### The *kasbah* of Nablus

The *kasbah* of Nablus is a historical centre of roughly three kilometres square. It is a living socio-spatial microcosm functioning with its residential, commercial, industrial, cultural, religious and open spaces, accommodating the everyday’s needs of its inhabitants within walking distance. The *kasbah* is the outcome of 2,000-years city-making processes spanning from the Hellenistic, to the Roman, Byzantine, Mamluk and Ottoman eras. Throughout these periods, the city went through several stages of construction, destruction and reconstruction, use and reuse, natural and manmade disasters. All this resulted in a multi-layered, entangled, compact and sophisticated urban tissue that accumulated and overloaded the city across these centuries of successive generations (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.**  
Location of Nablus  
and an aerial  
photograph in 2016

**Source:** The researcher on Google Earth photograph

This architectural aggregation and accumulation articulates in six main neighbourhoods (*harah* or *mahallah*), each of which consists of several blocks. Blocks of buildings congregate different built types and typologies including houses, factories, public baths, mosques, palaces and shops accommodating a myriad of functions and needs. Each block corresponds to a family clusters (*housh*), and each cluster includes several houses accommodating multiple dwelling units. Clusters can be residential only (*housh*), and they can also be an aggregation of mixed use buildings originated from the same family (Figure 2).

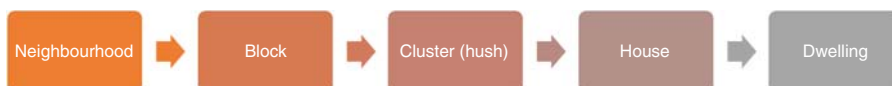
This seemingly hierarchical sequence of spaces does not necessarily represent a real hierarchical order. Looking from the ground, or even through an aerial view, one can observe an interweave of constructions, open spaces, streets and gardens formulating an intricate tissue where boundaries between buildings, neighbourhoods or even streets merge and entangle.

Within this interwoven urban fabric, streets can be classified in two types: accessible open streets (*share'*), and cul-de-sac alleyways called *zūkak*. The *zūkak* is normally inside a family *housh*, which is controlled and owned by the family; hence, the shape and layout were, and are still, changeable according to their evolving needs. This explains why the *zūkak* are not standardized, have irregular layouts and largely covered by rooms called *sabats*[2]. In terms of the right to passage, the *zūkak* is tightly restricted to inhabitants of the same *housh*.

On the other hand, the accessible streets (*share'*) mostly have regular straight shape, open for all people, and include few *sabats*. These open streets originate amongst others from the roman grid of the antique Nablus: among them two main streets across the city from East to West, accommodating the *souk* and most public facilities, functioning as spines for pedestrian movement and thus being the location for the very busy and vibrant life of the *kasbah*.

These two types of paths incubate three hierarchical levels of pedestrian circulation: heavy flow in the *souk*, moderate flow in streets without commercial activities and then the restricted flow of cul-de-sacs. However, a parallel circulation between buildings is possible by a discrete interwoven web of passages. These – mostly feminine – routes are generally shortcuts and routes of movement that avoid exposure to the public realm. They include alleyways, rooftops, interior courtyards, windows, back doors, derelict buildings and other elements. As a system they allow parallel, discrete, women-driven patterns of movement out of view.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the citizens of Nablus started to expand outside the old *kasbah* looking for detached, more ventilated and easily accessible houses. The municipality opened “modern” streets for that purpose on the slopes of the surrounding hills. This trend accelerated after the earthquake of 1927, when hundreds of the *kasbah*'s dwellings collapsed. As such, the vegetable and fruit gardens around the city were encroached for modern streets that encircled the *kasbah* from all directions, resulting in a sort of ring. In the course of the twentieth century, this ring developed significantly with the increasing erection of houses, villas, apartment buildings, shops, light-industry facilities in addition to the new commercial centre of the city. Being located in the valley between *Ebal* and *Gerizim* mountains, the expansion of Nablus during the twentieth century occupied the slopes, giving the new neighbourhoods better environmental conditions, and significant panoramic views towards the *kasbah* (Plate 1).



**Figure 2.**  
The hierarchical  
arrangement of  
liveable spaces



**Plate 1.**  
The *kasbah* of Nablus

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**Note:** Modern commercial centre appears in the upper right corner and modern apartment buildings appear on the upper left corner occupying the slopes of Gerizim mountain

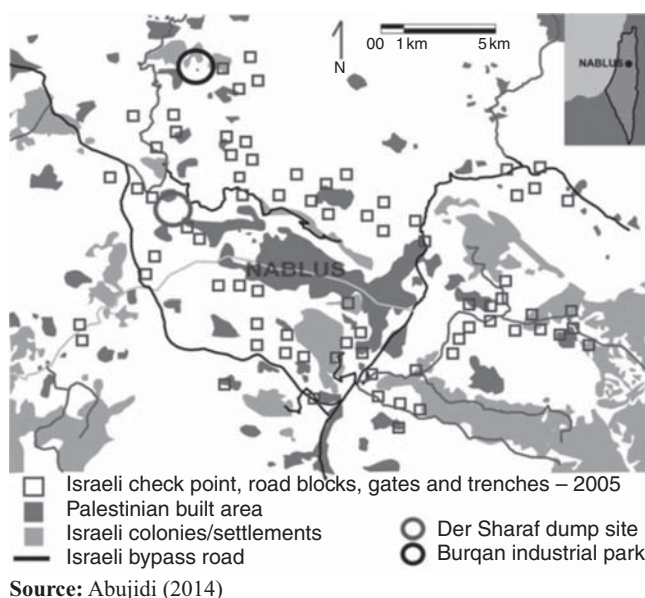
### **Establishing the matrix of control: besieging Nablus**

In the second Palestinian Intifada[3] started in 2000, Nablus had been presented as the incubator of Palestinian Resistance in the West bank. The *kasbah* of Nablus, with its dense and complex fabric, attracted the Palestinian resistance to take refuge in its compact environment (Abujidi, 2014). In the Summer of 2001, following the escalation of Intifada, the Israeli forces imposed a tight siege over the city, transforming it into a large open-air prison.

In further attempts to suppress the Palestinian Intifada, the Israeli army decided to attack the heart and guts of the revolution: in April 2002, they invaded most Palestinian cities in the West Bank, including Nablus, within the so-called "Operation Defensive Shield". On the eve of 3 April, the Israeli troops, stationed at military bases and colonies surrounding the city, started marching towards Nablus with the objective to eliminate local leaders and members of Palestinian armed resistance. The battle between the Israeli Army and hundreds of lightly weaponised Palestinian resistance members lasted from 3 April until 21, with the first six days witnessed intensified and harsh combat around and inside the *kasbah*. According to Amnesty International (2002), 80 Palestinians were killed, more than half of which were civilians. The Municipality of Nablus estimated that 65 buildings or clusters were completely destroyed, 221 were partially destroyed and around 60 families have been forced out of the *kasbah*.

In the attack of the *kasbah*, the Israeli Army exploited its extensive and superior power in implementing a matrix of control, which can be schematised into a three-level articulation: a macro level, encircling the whole city of Nablus; a meso level within the modern tissue around the *kasbah*; and a micro level, deep inside the *kasbah*'s residential clusters. The macro level is composed of a network of military bases, outposts, colonies, checkpoints and roadblocks that restrict the movement in and out the city and supply the logistics for military operations inside the *kasbah* (Weizman, 2007; Segal *et al.*, 2003; Abujidi, 2014) (Figure 3).

The meso-level aimed at tightening the cordon around the *kasbah* itself by disconnecting it from the surrounding modern neighbourhoods, taking advantage of the topography of the city and the wide streets of the modern neighbourhoods that surround the *kasbah*. Therefore, the encircling of Nablus *kasbah* was operated by Israeli tanks, bulldozers and



**Figure 3.**  
The macro level of  
Israeli matrix of  
control against Nablus

armoured vehicles supported by air corps and artillery, breaching through the modern neighbourhoods by crushing asphalt streets, operating heavy machine guns, firing sound grenade, riddling water tanks, bombing and cutting telecommunication lines and imposing curfew through loudspeakers. Simultaneously, the D-9 bulldozer dug up streets, broke water pipes and destroyed sewerage network and electricity infrastructure. Eventually, land units blocked the main roads and initiated mobile outpost at specific junctions, while several civilian buildings on the slopes of *Gerizim* and *Ebal* mountains were transformed into temporary cantonments and “Straw Widow”[4] houses (Figure 4).

Temporary cantonments are operational headquarters established by occupying and militarising civilian buildings. Once buildings were occupied, the army could set up the street and setbacks as parking for military vehicles, allocate new functions for each space and reorganise the interior furniture. These buildings normally served multiple uses, such as command and control stations, reservoirs of food and ammunition, observation points, snipers positions, accommodations for soldiers and, in some cases, detention centres.

The “*Mukawamah*” – the Palestinian armed resistance – acknowledging their inferior weaponry and training capacity, tried to turn the situation around by capitalising on the knowledge of the compact urban fabric of the *kasbah* to reduce the gap. Therefore, they concentrated their effort in preventing the Israeli army from entering the *kasbah*, barricading entrances, installing booby traps and preparing ambushes in the old town.

Understanding the inferiority in dominating the streets inside the *kasbah*, the Israeli Army actuated the counter strategy of “passing through walls, like a ‘worm’ chewing and ending up in a different place every time”, using the words of the Brigadier-General Aviv Kokhavi (Rotbard, 2015). This militarised choice of carving over-ground tunnels through buildings added another layer of movement beside the formal network of streets and cul-de-sacs and the informal, discrete female routes of shortcuts described earlier.

Once the ring of roads around the *kasbah* was controlled by the Israeli Army, temporary cantonments and “straw widow” houses were established, the penetration of the *kasbah* begun, implemented by creating a chain of advanced military outposts penetrating deep into



**Figure 4.**  
The meso and micro  
level of Israeli matrix  
of control against  
Nablus

**Source:** Abujidi (2014)

the *kasbah*. The intrusion made use of a set of tactical operations working together to enclose the matrix of control on the micro level. Three tactical tools were employed:

- (1) The launcher outpost: the paper suggests this term to name occupied/militarised buildings at the edge of the *kasbah* from which “worms” start;
- (2) the “Worm”[5]: forced routes starting from the launcher outpost and penetrating the dense fabric through the walls of the buildings; and
- (3) The controlling house[6]: several rhizomatic points of control (houses) reached through the worm.

The launcher outpost was the entry point for the Army inside the *kasbah*. It was normally a large residential building located on the edge of the old town, adjacent to a large open space such as a park, an open field or a wide street. Each invasion route started typically from a launcher outpost but each launcher outpost can be the starting point of more than one route.

Generally, the buildings chosen for this typology of outpost share common characters, the most important of which is that they are hitches that connect the two systems: the modern tissue of wide streets and the *kasbah* with its dense fabric. Moreover, these buildings are often composed of several and dividable residential units that are redistributed for military uses: ground floors protected by other buildings provide a safe refuge to soldiers, and upper floors provide different observation windows on the surroundings. The launcher outpost also had to be observable and visually “covered” by at least one “straw widow” house.

Once the launcher outpost is occupied, it becomes a starting point for advancing through the dense tissue of the town, with an infiltration procedure nicknamed the “worm”. “We were in Nablus and we started to advance using the “**worm**” procedure so as not to be exposed. The **houses were adjacent and had shared walls**. Blow a hole in a wall, pass through a house, **blow a hole** in a wall, pass through a house” (Breaking the Silence, n.d.).

Several tactical units would then be swarming inside the old town fabric simultaneously. The “worm” “has no form, no front, back or flank but moves “like a cloud” as by words of Shimon Naveh[7]. The “worm” is a realisation of a “rhizome”, a concept derived from Deleuze’s writings (Weizman, 2007): a branching out net, like the roots of a mushroom, spreading out underground root nets. This “rhizomatic” organisational pattern is a constellation of cells that operate partially independently and partially in coordination, according to the circumstances, flexibly reacting and accommodating with different contingencies.

The analysis of some “worm” routes during the research fieldwork highlighted how these clearly build upon a learning process and a mapping exercise made by Israeli soldiers: previous operations provide a feedback for later ones, accumulating throughout successive operations an increasingly precise knowledge of the urban architecture of the *kasbah*. Information gained from successive operations and from local informants (spies) was integrated so to connect the “worm” routes with the informal movement network existing in between buildings and mainly attended by women: this would provide shortcuts, protection and add a surprise factor to the “worm” routes, which would, this way, become three-dimensional, penetrating both inhabited and derelict houses, private and public space, through holes in walls, windows, back doors, terraces and rooftops (Figure 5).

Houses invaded by the worms will typically be either evacuated (pass-through houses) or militarised as “controlling houses”[8]: The “controlling houses” are internal “straw widow” houses where sniping hideouts and observation points are installed, some of which would be transformed into internal cantonment hosting a large number of soldiers.

Controlling houses were generally small, offering an observation possibility over adjacent streets or alleyways. They were consequently often located at street corners or having a *sabat* bridging the street. In some cases, they were transformed into advanced military bases hosting larger number of soldiers. In these houses, not only residents of the same house would be grouped and locked up in one room, but also the neighbours in the pass-through houses.

This chain of advanced militarised spaces composes a micro matrix of control inside the *kasbah*. Several snipers, soldiers, officers, in addition to spies in some cases, were positioned in several houses and coordinate together to tighten the control and surveillance. An Israeli soldier described a sniping accident in the *kasbah* as follows: “We set up sniper positions in the windows and waited. One of the marksmen identified a man on the roof [...] at two in the morning, an unarmed man walking on the roof [...] The company commander said ‘take him down’. Just like that, on the radio [...] and the sniper fired and killed him”. This narration shows that the sniper who took the Palestinian civilian down was one of at least four soldiers, three of which are inside the *kasbah* in three different locations, from which they could see the victim.

Through hidden windows, soldiers were detecting unaware civilians. The timing, place and even body gestures were parameters to judge a person to be shot or not. An Israeli soldier describes “A person standing on a roof with a cell phone during an activity [...] and the snipers sees him looking down at least twice, [...] looks a bit suspicious, you ask the regiment commander for permission to shoot such a person [...]” (Breaking the Silence, n.d.). In more extreme situations, through these positions Israeli soldiers were able to kill civilians inside their own dwellings, as in the case of Fathi Bulbul, a 85-year old man, shot dead inside his bedroom when trying to get up and move to a safer room within his house (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 2003).

To sum up, in order to penetrate into the dense tissue of the *kasbah*, the Israeli army had invented an alternative perception of the city map, made by an assemblage of manoeuvres where the army could find out and activate hidden passages and integrate them into forced routes. Such navigation system is based on a constellation of points and routes, with launcher outposts and controlling houses as points and the “worms” as routes. Though changeable according to intelligence information and targets of each operation, the urban





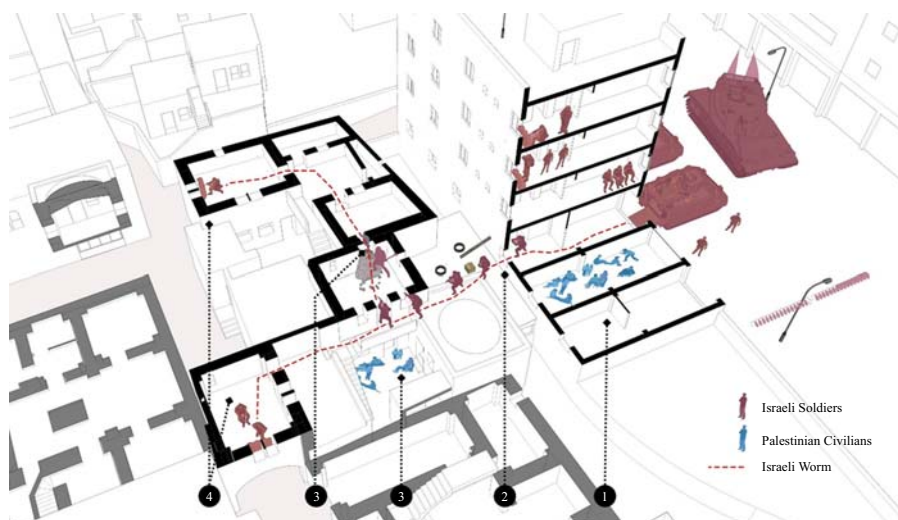
**Figure 5.**  
The Israeli army  
“worm” in Nablus’  
old town

**Notes:** The upper photo is a military map of the Israeli Army “worms” in Al-Yasmeeneh neighbourhood in the Kasbah of Nablus. The lower is a hole in a wall marked with the Hebrew word (knisah) which means entrance. Several marks as this still exist inside the Kasbah’s house  
**Source:** Weizman (2007)

architecture influenced, structured, and fixed some of its points and lines, making many of them predictable, and sometimes even mapped by inhabitants and the Palestinian Resistance (Figure 6).

### **The Palestinian matrix of “Sumoud”**

As early as the beginning of last century, the Palestinian society found itself in confrontation with the Zionist project that aimed at the creation of a Jewish state on the land of Palestine. Throughout the last 100 years, this confrontation passed through several stages and forms of conflict. The second Intifada in 2000 and the reoccupation of Palestinian



**Notes:** 1 – Launcher outpost; 2 – window used to pass through; 3 – pass-through house; 4 – hole in a wall; 5 – controlling house

**Figure 6.**  
Establishing an  
invading “worm”

towns in 2002 are episodes of this continuous story. Hence, whatever the form of oppression is practiced by the Israeli army, Palestinians find themselves in a state of refusal or resistance against the power of the Israeli State.

This refusal, resistance and confrontation with the Israeli Zionist project is what this paper refers to as *Sumoud* (Arabic: صمود). Particularly after the exile of around 800,000 Palestinians from their cities and villages in 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel, Palestinians use this term to express their determination not to be evacuated again. The term literally means steadfastness; however, it idiomatically refers to all acts that enable Palestinians to stay in their land and defend their right to self-determination. As such, the term *Sumoud* may refer to disobedience, resilience, resistance, survival or even maintaining everyday routines throughout, and despite, the conflict.

War, within the Palestinian context, became an urban subject, entangled and related to the urban environment. The invasion of Nablus in 2002 and the following weeks of curfew, however, witnessed an extreme violent change in the urban conditions, interrupting the everyday city functions and necessitated the civilians to improvise or organise dramatic and crucial counter tactical operations to adapt, cope or even just to survive.

As fleeing from the city was not an option, citizens of Nablus improvised their own *sumoud* tactics, which, although reactive and non-systematic, provided a sustainable apparatus of resistance, which in this paper will be addressed with the term of “matrix of *sumoud*”. This paper argues that the backbone of this matrix of *sumoud* is the specific architecture of the *kasbah* and its urban tissue.

Once combat began, fear, ambiguity and chaos start to occupy and overwhelm people with blackouts, shouts, bombs, gunshots, roars of tanks and loudspeakers asking people to stay as far as possible from windows. AM, one of the local inhabitants, describes so the first night of combat: “ We were scared and paralyzed, we didn’t know what is happening in the street, we didn’t know where the threat comes from or where to protect ourselves or where to escape [...]”. The image of the outdoor world became distorted, damaged and everything outside the room became ambiguous. At this moment, the meanings of spaces start to shift, change and even invert, being judged in the light of security and defence: the street was no

longer a public space or a corridor, but a fire zone; the window was no longer a view towards outside but a receptacle of gunshots; and the basement ceased to be a storage to become a family refuge. Every space is conceived differently.

The first impression of urban space in a war zone is that of destruction and chaos: however, as Woods (2001) claims, the same shattered spaces retain opportunities for creative moods of existence, living and survival. War deprives people from their regular everyday routines and from their basic rights to the city and its services, and, nevertheless, war also liberates possibilities of new spatial organisational patterns beyond the limits imposed by any authority.

Seeking a sort of stability, living and survival, people respond to war urgencies by the creative inventions of alternatives, including reinterpretation of the urban space and establishing a matrix of cooperation and mutual support. As Kropotkin (1902) asserts, necessity at this time, is the mother of cooperation, social exchange and generosity. It is the key for unlocking social conventions and accelerating mutual aid. As showed by several interviews and observations in the field, the inhabitants of Nablus's *kasbah* started to perceive the city composed of three major types of spaces: nodes, sneaks and edges.

#### *Nodes*

The "nodes" are strategic structures which meet specific urgent needs. Nodes during Nablus's siege were of two types: the first gets its importance from its physical or spatial character, while the second is a reservoir of specific items. Nodes of the first kind benefitted from their building materials, techniques, layout, design, topography, orientation, inside-outside relation, size or other physical characters, responding to the needs for sheltering, hiding, accommodating medical care, storing, etc. The physical features of this category of spaces were assessed in terms of capability of protection, concealment, centrality, proximity or capaciousness. The second type of nodes were those perceived as reservoirs of items of primary necessity like food, water, fuel, medicine, baby clothes, or cigarettes.

It is important to note that these nodes are typically ordinary spaces, houses, factories, markets and other structures in which people improvise new set-ups following their understanding of space and threats. Amongst those, the most crucial nodes were shelters: these required specific physical qualities: for example, basements or ground floors, having thick walls, adjacent to narrow alleyways and surrounded by other buildings were perceived the most protected. Thanks to its multi-layered tissue, old building techniques and materials, the *kasbah* offered a good milieu of suitable buildings for this purpose. A traditional space of the *kasbah*, the *baykeh* – either a stable or a storage space typically consisting in a cross vaulted chamber, built in with stone walls of more than 1 metre thickness – was perceived a particular suitable shelter. AR's *baykeh* underneath his dwelling was rehabilitated prior the war to be the residence of his mother; but during the attack, this space was rearranged so to shelter his family and four other neighbouring families. Being located in a slightly sloped site in the *kasbah*, with its back is completely covered by land, both lateral sides adjacent to other buildings also built in stone walls and the facade opening on a small outdoor space that provides the *baykeh* with natural light, ventilation and access to small kitchen and bathroom, AR's *baykeh* sheltered five families and remained safe, despite AR's house being in the middle of the combat zone and received several gunshots and a heavy tank shell that destroyed the second floor and partially the first floor. As AR points out, "If we stayed upstairs, you wouldn't see me now".

Other important nodes were suitable for hiding. The *kasbah* provides numerous hideouts inside or outside buildings, underground or over-ground, explicit or camouflaged spaces. The compactness, irregularity, high height-to-width ratio of the passages, in addition to the lifting of social restrictions of using private gardens, courtyards and other spaces helped to offer outdoor hiding sites that were not perceivable by the Israeli Army. The possibilities of

hideouts cannot be counted: cavities inside structural elements like thick walls or columns, derelict underground basements, rooftops, behind water tanks and domes, or even camouflaged with the washing hung on the rooftops.

Other important nodes are the medical centres. The lack of a proper medical facility inside the *kasbah* required the preparation of temporary field hospitals: mosques and family *diwans*[9] were favoured spaces, thanks to their large dimensions, proximity to expected[10] frontier lines, or their centrality in the town. Spaciousness in this regard was allowed to divide the space into several functions such as emergency, surgeries, waiting zone and even temporary mortuary. Building readapted into field hospitals were chosen for their direct connections to streets for pedestrians as well as for ambulances who would transfer injured to hospitals outside the *kasbah*.

The second category of nodes is those for stocking primary supplies, so to ensure the availability of survival goods within the boundaries of the *Kasbah*. Shops, vegetable markets, pharmacies, bakeries, etc., are available in the main *souk* as well as inside each neighbourhood, with the tight road sections and the dense built environment sheltering at least in part these activities, reachable through covert streets or back doors, despite being often located in risky zones and hence to be reached with great caution.

As for water supplies, the *kasbah* is provided by water through a modern network connected with a water pump located inside the *kasbah* itself, and integrated by natural springs also situated inside the *kasbah* and that feed the pump station. As the streets are not wide enough to allow Israeli bulldozers to get through, the Israeli Army was not able to destroy the network. The problem arose when the pump engines ran out of fuel, and alternative water options needed to be found.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that almost all dwellings in the city use water tanks as reservoirs, normally installed at rooftops. Although the Israeli Army regularly targeted these containers, some houses could keep them in protected spaces: intact tanks became then nodes. In addition to that, mosques could provide a back-up, being normally provided with a large number of tanks to serve worshipers *wadoo* [11], which were not that intensely used during the siege and hence made available for civilian use. Other important water sources are the *sibils*[12], supplied by water from springs inside the old town itself and available in all neighbourhoods within people's reach.

Productive and commercial activities also would witness a temporary and informal transformation into public facilities: bakeries are thus reservoirs of wheat flour, yeast, wood or gas tubes; cars are reservoirs of fuel for electricity generators; and carpentry workshops provide wood used for heating, cooking and so on. After a few days of heavy combat, the field hospital and the entire neighbourhood ran out of food and fuel for electricity generators, and the communication with outside supplies were completely cut: hence, a group of young men organised into teams to scout the available undamaged cars to retrieve fuel to keep electricity generators working, while others would sneak to nearby bakeries to retrieve flour wheat, gas pipes and pieces of wood to deliver to neighbours who volunteered to cook for the whole community.

### *Sneaks*

Sneaks are alternative routes of movement that are concealed from the Israeli fields of view. Through its matrix of control, the Israeli Army monitored regular movement options inside the *kasbah*. As such, large portions of streets and paths became within fields of fire, marking them as no-man's land.

To confront this new reality, locals redefined alternative circulation patterns. Many paths and passages invisible to the Israeli army were consolidated with "junctions" to create clandestine or camouflaged three-dimensional sneaks that are imagined, adjusted and adopted to pass-through fire-free fields. Junctions are transitional spaces with the primary

role to facilitate a concealed convergence, transition, movement, and crossing from one space to another. The dense urban fabric of the *kasbah* offered different forms of junctions: derelict or inhabited buildings, *sabats*, tunnel-like streets, shaded portions of narrow passages, back doors, windows, rooftops, sun-shaded terraces, large trees or even a recess in a wall. There is a certain degree of excitement about junctions and sneaks: though risky, opportunistic and continuously changing, these passages undermine the value of distances between combatants. What dominates the determination of these particular passages is the field of view, regardless the actual, physical proximity and junctions would often be located in tangentially to Israeli Army's positions, bringing soldiers and fighters physically very close to each other, but still invisible one to the other. In several cases, junctions were used both by Israeli army and Palestinian fighters.

Sneaks were essential to the civilian survival, as they are essential ways for escaping, delivering items and people, rescuing wounded people, recovering dead bodies, conveying news and communicating information. Several cases of sneaking between and through spaces found in the field proved to be decisive for the life or death of people. MA's family and their neighbours sneaked through the opening of an old closed window to a neighbouring derelict building. Minutes later the living room where they were sheltered received a tank shell: ZS' family found escape through their backdoor, which opened to their relatives house through a private garden, before their house became a heavy battle ground between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian fighters. AH's family survived by quickly crossing a narrow alleyway to another safe *housh* after a Palestinian gunman offered a cover by distracting an Israeli sniper, and so on. Unfortunately, some families could not make it: the *Shu'bi* family were buried under the rubble of their house by a D-9 bulldozing while they were trying to escape through their backdoor.

### *Edges*

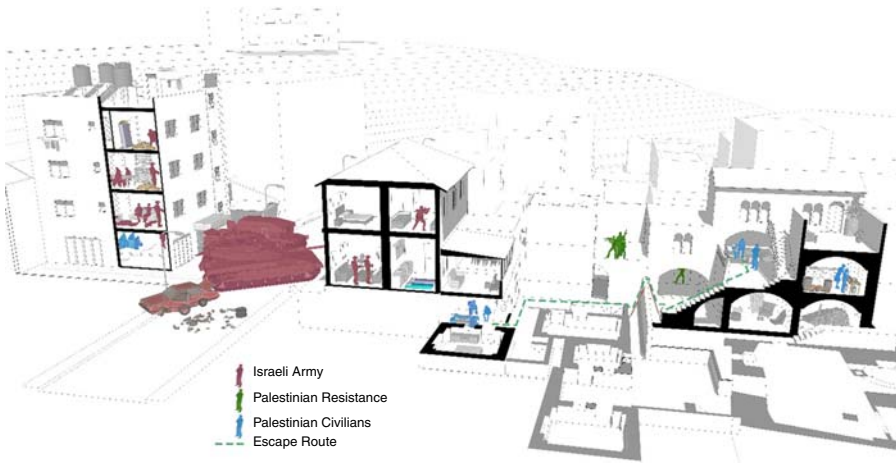
Edges are three-dimensional imagined lines that separate exposed and protected spaces. In other words, they are frontier lines that are mentally demarcated according to expected (or confirmed) fields of fire.

Fields of fire cannot be identified on a bidimensional map, but rather on a three-dimensional one, and this makes identifying edges more complicated and prone to fatal mistakes. Unfortunately, as snipers normally take completely camouflaged hide sites, many edges were identified only empirically by the loss of someone's life. Furthermore, edges, in many cases, enter indoor spaces separating one individual dwelling into two zones.

Identified and confirmed edges are important organisational features for recognising people's domains of activity. In order for sneaks to be established, for example, they essentially require identified edges, which, in turn, require synchronized organisational references. These reference elements are generated through an exchange of information, acquired actively and passively. Actively means that feedback is communicated directly from the provider through telecommunications, gestures, whispers, letters or vocally. Passively means that the receiver understands indirectly through his sensorial skills, frequently assumed through the absence of feedback, sounds, smells, and so on. A very common example of passive reference is the anticipation of possible fields of fire from a building occupied by Israeli Army: in this case, the building's architectural features such as height and windows would suggest the locals, possible firing positions (Figures 7 and 8).

### **The social dimensions**

In general, introducing nodes, improvising the sneaks and identifying edges works by means of a collective social effort which this paper describes as a matrix where different parties participate to synthesise it. The social dimension in the matrix of *sumoud* is manifested in two main factors: the lifting of numerous social conventions, and the thick social network.



**Figure 7.**  
Palestinian family escape route



**Notes:** 1 – Israeli armoured vehicle at the street entrance; 2 – Israeli “controlling houses” reached through worms; 3 – rubbles of destroyed building offered a hidden passage across the street; A – Palestinian man got shot at this point; B – mosque appropriated as field hospital. The red line indicates an Israeli Army worm, and the blue line a Palestinian rescue route

**Figure 8.**  
Rescue path

*Lifting of social conventions*

The Israeli invasion is a time of exception. On the Palestinian side, this opens the gate to activate what is called “*ahkam Al darora*” (rules of necessity), which is a condition that allows a shift of a number of social/religious conventions that normally regulate people’s behaviours. The “*Ahkam al darora*”, which states that “necessities permit prohibitions” (*ad-darorat tobeeh al-mahthorat*), is a condition common to all cultures that is also credited and confirmed by the Islamic *Sharia*, which is still to a large extent influencing people’s

everyday life in the Palestinian context, and more particularly during war times (Kamal, 2015). As explained by Kamal in her thesis, regardless of being practicing religious traditions or not, religious beliefs and statements were commonly used to approve ones' behaviour especially when a break of social convention is needed, like sharing a bedroom with neighbouring families, for example.

The abolition of restrictions on the use and accessibility within privately owned spaces is the backbone for the improvisation of sneaks and the establishment of several nodes. Several examples showing the shift in social codes were found during the field research. At Abu Ra'fat's house, four families were sleeping, eating, playing and, sometimes, fighting in one room; At Maya's house, a stranger man was sharing the same bedroom with the family for a week, and, at Abu Badr's house, more than 30 men, women and kids were defecating in a bucket put in a corner at the same room where they were all locked in. There answer to how people accept doing this was always one: "necessities permit prohibitions". The interviewees emphasised that in crisis most social taboos and constraints dissolve, people become brothers and sisters looking after each other. Solnit (2010) describes this moment as an improvisation of another kind of society, a society that is built on altruism and mutual aid, a society that shows how "deeply most of us desire connection, participation, altruism and purposefulness".

The feeling of unity is a crucial stimuli. When people are asked about their memories of siege and invasion, despite the frustration and sense of sadness they all share the same nostalgic and emotional statements: "we were all one hand", "we were all together", "we were brothers and sisters", etc. These statements, praising the community feelings, practically imply a break with the regular definitions of what is ours and what is theirs, what is public and what is private, what is society and what is community, what is proper and what is not. In the "Scientific American", Emma Seppala explains that shared vulnerability which normally emerges out of acute stress, like war, is a core ingredient for social bonding, kindness, connection, and desire to stand together and support each other (Seppala, 2012). Spatially speaking, the emergent bonds mean that privacy constraints that striate the space of everyday are smoothed, opening houses for strangers, joining bedrooms with neighbours, sharing beddings with other families, distributing last reserves of food and putting aside old disputes.

### *Social network*

The residents of the *kasbah* are the foundation for a multi-layered social network that is intensified by proximity of dwellings inside each cluster and the entanglement of clusters inside each neighbourhood.

On the micro level, each individual is part of at least one social circle: the family, which expands beyond the nuclear family to the extended one, which may also include – to a certain degree – the in-laws relatives. This not only increases the number of members, but also expands the geographical distribution that they occupy. Additionally, in the *kasbah*, there are multiple and diverse social circles within which people interact: informal, which is normally space related; semi-formal, which is normally ideology related; and others are formal which are more institutional related.

The informal or space-related circles include neighbours dwelling in the *housh* or in the neighbourhood. Neighbourliness is very strong, informal, space-related social tie, it comes next after the family, and, in some cases even, before. Other important communities are *Rejal Al-Harah*[13], *Niswan Al-Harah*[14], *Shabab Al-Harah*[15], *Shabab Al-Jame* [16], in addition to the kids and young teenage boys and girls who are very important elements in the *kasbah*'s social mosaic. Each of these circles meet in specific places, discuss diverse issues and normally organise themselves as a community bond.

In addition to these informal circles, other semi-formal, more organised groups exist. The most common circle is *Al-Tanzim* (The organisation), which in the West Bank is normally the group affiliated with *Fatah* political party. Being part of a large political faction, each *Al-Tanzim* group in a neighborhood is well connected with other *Al-Tanzim* members in other neighbourhoods and organises collective activities on the city scale. Other groups affiliated with other political parties exist, but stay clandestine and they do not express their affiliation explicitly, although very active in several neighbourhoods. Other parties' grassroots groups interact and operate either individually or camouflaged as charity organisations. During the siege and invasion, members of these groups activated in two ways, some of them engaging with community activities as part of *Shabab Al-Harah*, while others by joining actively the armed resistance.

Formal groups add to these informal and semi-formal social groups. They are formal in the way that the bond includes an organised commitment, like work, sports club or membership in an organisation. One of these circles emerged in the case study during the battle time was the Popular Committees, an association of volunteers who work in groups coordinated, funded and supported by the governorate or some relief agencies.

The family is the underlying network transversal to these social circles and that somehow connects them and puts them in communication. Fares, one of my interviewees was one of *Shabab Al-Harah*, and narrates that his father was an active figure within the group of *Rejal Al-Harah* and was always active in social reconciliation meetings; his mother was also meeting frequently with *Niswan Al-Harah* in the *housh*'s courtyard, while his elder brother was a member of *Al-Tanzim* and a policeman, and his sister works as a nurse in a governmental hospital. In Fares' family, as in many others, each member has his own connections, which would be swiftly reactivated and exploited during the invasion time.

These multiple bonds and circles, fostered and supported by the peculiar structure of the *kasbah*, intensified the possibilities of connections and expanded the matrix of exchange and cooperation during times of crisis. In most survival tactical operations, the asset of spaces, facilities and routes provided by the old town would not be usable without a network of people able to navigate the spatial contents and social networks, exchanging information about where items were located and how to approach them.

The following example shows well how the *housh* would work as a social hub where social conventions could be lifted and connections were of great help. Hours prior to attack, MA phoned his friend whose house is on the edge of the *kasbah*, telling him that their *housh* had plenty of safe spaces where they would be welcomed to stay during the battle. The friend accepted the invitation and took his family and other neighbouring families to that *housh*. The displaced households were thus distributed in different dwellings. The first night of the battle went with no electricity, no news, and many gunshots and bombshells. MA's *housh* had a relatively large courtyard that connects all dwellings together and is protected from all sides with at least two-storey, old, stone facades which made it relatively safe. The courtyard became a vital connector between these multiple dwellings. In the next day, and without much planning, the social relations started to rearrange in a new manner: all families becoming entitled as users of the whole *housh*, with no hosts, no guests, no families, but brothers and sisters who have to survive together. As such, the space was also rearranged with mutual help between all. One collective kitchen was set up, specific safe rooms were appointed as shelters, warm beddings were brought, mattresses were spread on ground and safes for personal items were also allocated. The communication with the outside world was managed through one shared cell phone at the time: when the battery of a phone went off, they would switch on the second one and so on. Charging mobile credits was managed through a university friend living outside the *kasbah*, who was buying prepaid cards, scratch and deliver the



charging code through SMS. The connection routes with other *houshes* were introduced through the knowledge that individuals have. Shabab *Al-Harah* used to move secretly in between dwellings and spaces to deliver items while the security conditions of these sneaks were always updated and confirmed by *Al-Tanzim* fighters.

### Final notes

This paper provides a look at the way the architecture of the *kasbah*, with its multi-layered assemblage, is an open signifier. If this assemblage is crafted and coded in the everyday, it can be reimagined, reconstituted and reassembled as a battlefield, opening opportunities and possibilities for the agency of different and conflicting trajectories. The architecture of the *kasbah* allowed two conflicting matrixes to co-exist simultaneously: a matrix of control enforced by the occupier and based on launcher outposts, “worms” and controlling houses, chasing after a matrix of *Sumoud* created by the local inhabitants and articulated in nodes, sneaks and edges. These two matrixes overlapped several times in the same structures without intersecting, simply because the matrix of *Sumoud* would be out of the sight of the matrix of control. This specific reality lies behind the multiplicity of possibilities for coping and survival tactics that Palestinian civilians learned to consider, adapt and regenerate.

Additionally, the power of architecture in structuring human spatial practices, or, in Tschumi’s (1996) words, “the physical violence of architecture on users’ imagination, perception and usage of the space” narrowed down the spatial possibilities of creating invading routes and determined the trajectory of several Israeli “worms”, a fact that helped the residents to predict the Israeli presence and excogitate protective measures accordingly. An example of this are simple makeshift alert devices like those made by neighbours sharing rooftops or gardens, who would put metal sheets between properties so to be alerted by the sound produced by the steps of Israeli soldiers accidentally passing of them.

In addition to that, the very architecture of the *kasbah* limited the ability of the Israel “worms” to achieve at least two of the three principles of close quarters combat[17]: surprise and speed. Digging holes in thick stone walls consumed time and produced loud sound that enabled Palestinians in several cases to escape, hide or even to announce civilians’ presence.

The diversity and intensity of social bonds within the social network is a very important factor: the more diverse and intense, the more alternatives and information are exchanged; the larger the number of people are gathered, the more divers and intensified social network is made available, while the smaller the area, the closer and faster interactions will be. In this sense, the *housh* clusters a large number of people, in a small private and controlled area, creating an intensified social network.

Finally, it should be noted that tactics discussed here were answering urgencies of specific type of urban combat and results do not confirm that the *kasbah* represents a defensive paradigm in general. For example, the combat neither includes mass aerial bombardment like what happened in Gaza 2014 or the massive bulldozing of neighbourhoods like what happened in Jenin refugee camp in 2002, nor it underwent a chemical attacks like those used in Syria nowadays. However, it is clearly shown that the *kasbah* as a socio-spatial structure performs in sheltering its inhabitants and backing up their everyday, offering several options of survival tactics in specific forms of urban combat.

### Notes

1. The chair of Urban Warfare Studies at the Modern War Institute.
2. *Sabat* is a room built above the street or alleyway.
3. Intifada is the term describing the Palestinian revolution against Israeli occupation.

4. The term is commonly used by Israeli soldiers in their testimonies by “breaking the silence” and well discussed in Erella Grassiani’s book *Soldiering Under Occupation: Processes of Numbing Among Israeli Soldiers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada* (2013). The “Straw Widow” house is a procedure or a battle technique where an assaulting unit takes over a populated house and places snipers, sharpshooters or marksmen at windows and some hideouts. The main objective of these houses is to dominate the streets and control the movement inside, outside and around the Kasbah, as well as to provide fire cover to the operating units on the ground. These buildings are mostly apartment buildings, composed of four floors or more, located on the slopes of *Gerizim*.
5. The term is used by Israeli Army officers to describe routes of Israeli soldiers through the walls of the *kasbah*.
6. The term is commonly used by Israeli soldiers in their testimonies by “breaking the silence”.
7. Brigadier General (Ret.) Shimon Naveh, the Founder and former Head of the “Israel Defense Forces” Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI).
8. A term used by Israeli soldiers in their testimonies collected by the human rights NGO Breaking the Silence.
9. Family *diwan* is private hall inside a family house: it is normally used to welcome male guests.
10. The locations of relief agencies – women associations in addition to individual practitioners organised with the governor of Nablus to establish field hospitals – were allocated according to expected combat zones.
11. *Wodoo’* is an Islamic obligation of washing parts of human body before prayers.
12. Water *sibil* is a traditional public water source that is fed by a natural spring. Around 16 *sibils* exist in the *kjasbah*.
13. The term can be translated as “men of the neighbourhood” and it generally refers to older men in the neighbourhood.
14. The term can be translated as “women of the neighbourhood” and it generally refers to older women of the neighbourhood.
15. The terms can be translated as “youth of the neighbourhood”.
16. The term can be translated as “youth of the mosque” and it generally refers to young men who practice their prayers in the mosque regularly.
17. According to the US Military manual *FM 90-10-1 – An Infantryman’s Guide to Combat in Built Up Areas*, the principles of close quarters combat are surprise, speed and controlled violent action.

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