

The Role of the Elite in City Expansion: Nablus City in the Palestinian Central Mountains as a Case Study

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Abstract

The growth of cities has been facilitated by a variety of factors. One of these is the land annexation by municipality with the assistance of elite individuals. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the elite influenced Nablus—in central Palestine Municipality’s expansion. The study scanned Nablus Municipality Archives, conducted interviews with the annexed villages’ people and used master plans to trace out the city’s expansion across time from 1960 to 2016 (Jordanian rule, Israeli occupation, and Palestinian Authority rule). The ‘elite’ theory has been used to explain how the expansion process succeeded. The analysis found that elite groups proposed and oversaw Nablus Municipality’s expansion boundaries at various times, delayed master plan’s approval and influenced the distribution plots for popular housing projects.

Keywords

Elite, land annexation, Nablus Municipality, elite theory

Introduction

This article highlights the role of the elite in the expansion of Nablus boundaries. The elite theory, which is used in reference to urban political theories, holds that a small, privileged group of people have control over limited resources and that the city’s elite must form an alliance with influential societal players (Rast, 2007). It is found on the idea that every society has a minority that controls the most essential power sources and is used to distinguish between people or groups based on their possessions, wealth, position and leadership (López, 2013), and how the elites form business-dominated alliances depend on national political forces to have an impact locally (Zdunić, 2017).

The elite rule society by occupying positions of power (Ngwabi, 2009). ‘The elite as minority are superior to the majority due to its organization and the disorder of the majority so, the elite monopolizes power, resources, society and can hold political positions in society which cannot govern itself

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democratically' (Bayumi, 2004, p. 13). They are persons occupying the top of powerful organizations and movements, thus capable of affecting political outcomes (López, 2013).

The elites are a group of individuals whose decisions play an important role in shaping the future of the masses, are relevant to urban change and regeneration and benefit only a few powerful people and stakeholders with little or no benefit for the poor (Ngwabi, 2009). They are not a homogeneous group; their power comes from different sources and emerges from different organizations. The elites are of following types: political rulers or political elites; business elites, military elites, in the state system, state administrative elites (López, 2013); and elite families or economically upper-class families (Farrell, 1993, p. 5).

The elite has a history of interfering with planning procedures throughout the world. In the Greater Khartoum region, political leaders have impacted urban land use and governed master plans to the objectives and interests of the government system, which discourages participation from the general population since their interests conflict with those of the powerful (Ahmed, 2010).

The prevailing political elites in Ghanaian cities, with little or no experience in urban planning, did initiatives that resulted in a chaotic environment, urban blight and did not reflect the desires of the population rather than their own (Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2016). Despite the majority vote in Croatia against the golf resort project's implementation in the Dubrovnik Council city, the political elites' strategies prohibited mass movements from supporting or opposing it (Zdunić, 2017).

In India, elite interests influenced urban planning, economic development, master plans and major urban infrastructure projects (Basu, 2019). The peak of the elite's competing urban infrastructure initiatives appears in Beirut's southern suburbs. Of all the Middle Eastern cities, Cairo has the largest residential density and the worst traffic. The most populous places are left overcrowded, filthy and antiquated as the rich create new urban infrastructure in the desert to improve conditions there (Deboulet, 2010, p. 149).

In America, Los Angeles city used its monopoly power over the metropolitan area water supply to force land annexation¹ on outlying areas (Bromley & Smith, 1973).

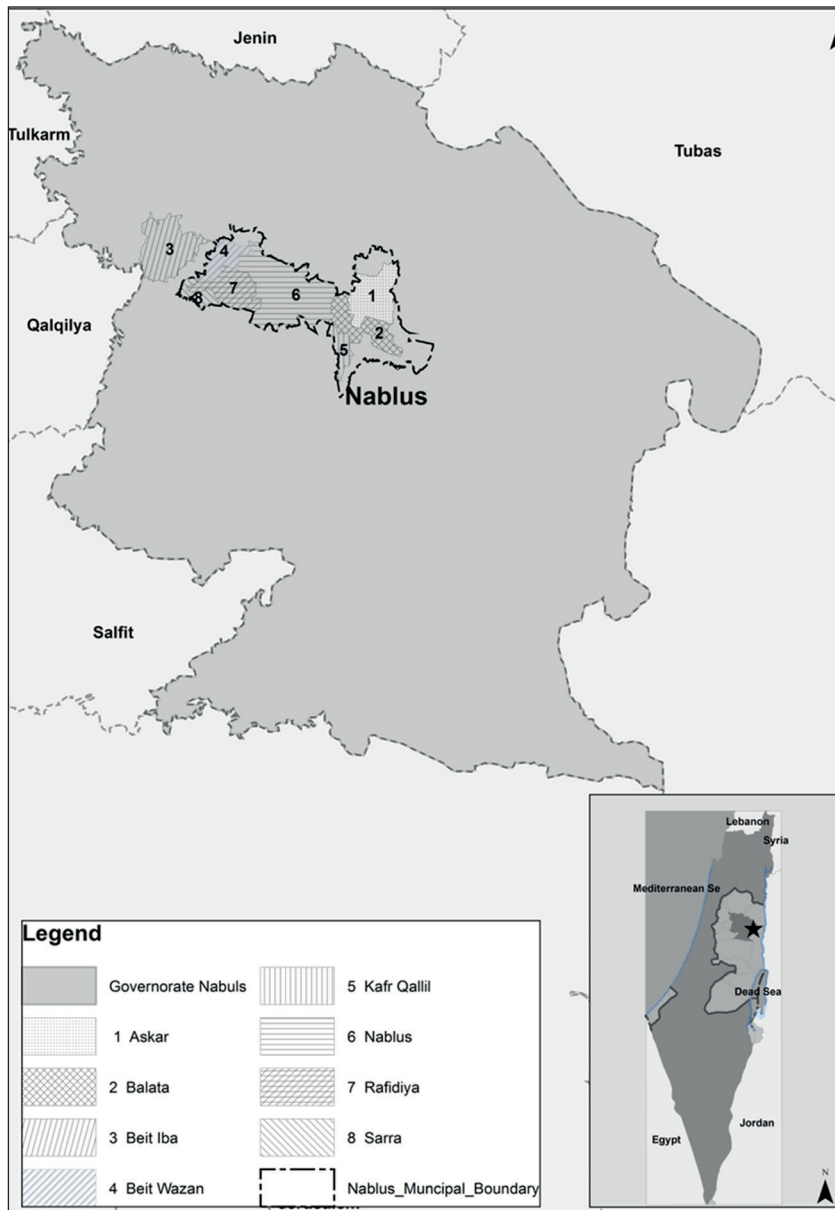
In Istanbul, the local authority structures influenced planning and decision-making policies in urban redevelopment projects. The community involvement was weakened and marginalized, and the local redevelopment agenda is mostly framed on the state agenda. The stakeholder's involvement was structured in the current national legislative and political framework (Waite, 2016).

In California, municipal governments controlled community boundary expansion by annexation to increase the power of existing governments and their departments (Mehay, 1981, p. 54). Community involvement is a key component of Metropolitan Sydney's urban planning strategy, but it is challenging to involve poor and disadvantaged groups in the process because planning programs are controlled by powerful political and bureaucratic groups and because of the elite culture of political and bureaucratic control (Mahjabeen et al., 2009).

Studies about the role of the elite in Palestinian cities' expansion are few. Nablus is one of the oldest cities in the world and a Canaanite city, situated in the Palestinian Central Mountains, between 'Ebal and Jerzim mountains (Addabbagh, 1988, pp. 97–98; Map 1). Nablus boundaries expanded many times through land annexation from surrounding villages since 1960. The expansion has largely been driven by elite interests.

Methodology

The historical and descriptive methodology was used to describe the elite's role in land annexation from surrounding villages to Nablus city boundaries during different ruling periods. The necessary data were



Map I. The Location of Nablus City, and Some Villages in the Nablus Governorate.

obtained from the formal correspondences in different archives that documented the expansion of Nablus Municipality since the Jordanian period (1960–2016). Nablus Municipality Public Library Archive (N.M.P.L.A), Nablus Municipality Archives (N.M.A.), Nablus Municipal Council Meetings Minutes and the Ministry of Local Government archive. Several interviews were conducted with annexed

villages' people about the elite role in doing so. The information gleaned from interviews and the archives about villages' land annexation were analysed quantitatively.

Discussion

The Elite Role in Expanding Nablus Municipality Boundaries During Different Ruling Periods

In the Jordanian period before 1967, Nablus governor, as administrative elite (López, 2013) proposed land annexation of Balata, Askar and Rafidiya villages to Nablus Municipality boundaries in 1956 (Map 1; N.M.A., Archive no. 3/22, File no. 22, 1956). Rafidiya village's mukhtar² and committee, as local elite asked for annexing the village to Nablus Municipality boundaries (N.M.A., Archive no. 3/22 File no. 44, 1959).

In the Israeli period (1967–1994), Kafr Qallil village's head and council, (Map 1), as local elite, asked Israeli's Administrative Governor as military elite, for annexing the village to Nablus Municipality boundaries (N.M.A., Archive no. 3/22, File no. 10, 1986). Additionally, Nablus mayor, as an administrative and social elite, suggested the municipality's boundaries expansion by annexing the nearby villages in a special meeting on 30 December 1986, without naming the villages or soliciting the public's input (Nablus Municipality Council Meeting Minutes, 1986).

Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, Nablus mayors frequently annexed territory as a political and social elite without consulting the village's councils or the villagers themselves. First, on 13 May 1996, the mayor of Nablus addressed a letter to the minister of local government requesting approval for the annexation of Area A into Nablus (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22 File no. 8, 1996). Second, on 21 August 1996, Nablus mayor announced in *Al Nahar* newspaper a partial land annexation of three villages (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22 File no. 2, 1996), without coordination with the villages' councils (interview with Turabi and Abu 'Eisheh, 2017). 'Nablus Municipality didn't discuss with Beit Iba village's council annexing its land, rather it announced annexation in the newspaper' (interview with Malik Shakir 2017).

Third, without consulting Beit Iba, Beit Wazan and Sarra villages, Nablus Municipality announced the annexation of their lands (Map 1). Nablus Municipality declared villages' lands to be annexed to its boundaries, and an announcement was published in *Al Nahar* newspaper, so it sent a letter on 10 September 1996, requesting Beit Wazan mukhtar and the village's projects committee to cease all activities in the proposed annexed land (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 23, 10 September 1996).

Following the villages of Beit Wazan and Beit Iba's rejection of the decision to annex villages to Nablus boundaries, a meeting between the Ministry of Local Government and the Director-General of the Planning Department of Nablus was held on 23 November 1996, to discuss the expansion of Nablus boundaries towards the two villages, the objection letter of Beit Wazan on annexing its lands, and how to persuade Beit Wazan and Beit Iba (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 25, 1996). Surprisingly, neither of the two villages' councils attended any of the meetings between Nablus and the Ministry of Local Government.

Until 2001, due to a legal flaw—the decision to expand Nablus boundaries was not published in the Official Gazette in 1986—the processes to do so in 1987 were never finished. The administrative state (López, 2013) elites like the Ministry of Local Government, Minister of Justice (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 7. 2001), the municipality mayor and the Palestinian Authority presidents (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 1/61/3923, 2001), the Director General of Local Government in Nablus, the Minister of Local Government (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 1/1, 2001), Nablus mayor, the Director General

of Local Government in Nablus (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 4, 2001), and with the Director of the Land Registration Department in Nablus (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 3, 2001) made or did numerous correspondences in order to allow Nablus Municipality to publish a notice in the Official Gazette in 2001, 15 years after the event and secure clearance for the extension that occurred in 1987 (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 1/1, 2001). To assist Nablus Municipality in resolving its legal issue, in November 2001, the Minister of Local Government approved the publication of the announcement of its extension in the Official Gazette (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, File no. 9, 2001).

Comparable, Kafr Qallil village's council was fighting against annexing village's land since 1997 by sending many objection letters to several ministers of Local Government Ministry (Ministry of Local Government, 1997), signed by Kafr Qallil residents (Ministry of Local Government, 1998). However, after 20 years, no responses have been received.

In contrast, Sarra village's land was annexed easily in 2001 because of a petition submitted by powerful individuals who had purchased land (N.M.A. Archive no. 3/22, 1998). Furthermore, Nablus Municipality proposed land annexation in 2016, without any communication with the villages proposed to be annexed (interview with Qadus, Ishtayeh, 2019). Also, the villages' residents annexed knew about the projects Nablus Municipality implements in their land, from the newspapers, or at the municipality's inception (interview with Sayel and Abu 'Eisheh, 2017).

The political elite also, influenced the master plan ratification's delay, as in 1996, the Higher Organization Council approved a temporarily master plan for Nablus Municipality. However, the law only allows for such temporary clearance for a year before the plan must be presented for final approval. Because Nablus mayor was and is still a member of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which assured confirmation, which delayed the plan's approval until 2013 (interview with Al Hanbali, 2017).

In addition to their role in land annexation and the master plan's approval, the elite also has an impact on how the land units of the two popular housing projects—the eastern one in 'Askar village and the western one in Rafidiya village—are distributed. Many of the property pieces in the eastern project, said a member of Al Tamimi family, have been allocated to affluent people, businesspeople and senior staff who already possess lavish residences. For example, a wealthy Karsu family member registered four land pieces for himself and his sons, who now own the land and will sell it when its value increases. Similarly, two council members from the 'Abdul Hadi and Shaheen families asked the municipality to rethink the illegal distribution of 44 units in the western project and to distribute the land units to low-income persons who merit and meet the project's requirements (N.M.P.L.A. Archive no. 844, File no. 1/28, 1977). These influential people, both inside and outside the municipality, thus, are regarded as Nablus business elite and had a bearing on how these projects were dispersed (López, 2013, p. 3).

Results

Nablus Municipality expansion has been sought by and influenced by several prominent elites. As a 'state administrative elites' (López, 2013, p. 3) Nablus District governor proposed annexing 'Askar, Balata and Rafidiya villages under the Jordanian rule. Nablus mayor, who represents 'elite families or upper-class families' (Farrell, 1993, p. 5) sought land annexation during the Israeli occupation, and in 1986, the Israeli military leadership known as a 'military elite' (López, 2013, p. 3) accepted the plan to expand.

Ten villages were annexed into Nablus in 1986, but the municipality did not consult these communities because all expansions were approved by various elite groups at various times, and the populace could not disagree with a decision made by such powerful individuals. Residents of the annexed villages were marginalized during the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority eras, which means that citizens'

rights were excluded (Zdunić, 2017). All Nablus expansion proposals, during the Palestinian Authority period, were done by Nablus mayors as ‘political elite’ (Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2016) by ‘families elite’ (Farrell, 1993, p. 5) of Shak’a, Tubeleh, and Ya’eesh, and by ‘state administrative elite’ (López, 2013, p. 3). Because the elite types never interacted with one another outside of power interactions, power always had the upper hand in institutional and economic contexts (Foucault, 1985, pp. 11–12).

The ‘business elite’ (López, 2013, p. 3) who held land in Sarra village wrote a letter asking to expedite and successful annexation. They have done an alliance with Sarra village’s council as ‘state administrative elite’ to annex the land to Nablus, confirming the idea that elites work through coalitions, most of which are driven by commercial interests. Sometimes, for local impact, these collaborations rely on national political factors (Ngwabi, 2009).

The fact that the Kafr Qallil village’s council and residents have been writing objections against annexing their lands to Nablus boundaries for more than 10 years but have received no responses, highlights the role of the political and state administrative elites in pushing for the annexation of village’s land to Nablus city’s municipal boundaries. Like what occurred in Croatia, where the political elite shut out mass social movements opposed to the completion of the golf resort project (Zdunić, 2017). Nablus Municipality did not heed the villagers’ views about the annexation of their land. Because the elites see themselves as a superior minority and relevant to the urban chain for the benefit of a small number of powerful people, this neglect ensured that the elite is a group of people whose decisions have a significant impact on shaping the life choices and futures of the masses (Ngwabi, 2009). However, the elites did not consider what the masses of people desired.

Kafr Qallil village refused annexing their lands in 1987, but Nablus Municipality insisted on it in 2016, despite the lack of communication from the municipality, the Ministry of Local Government, or the local government directorate in Nablus regarding annexing the village’s territory in 2016 (interviews with Sayel, 2017; Qadus, 2019). This demonstrated how the local government combined their influence with powerful parties (Foucault, 1985, p. 62). All the departments inside the municipality and the Ministry of Local Government were involved in the process of land annexation, without the knowledge of the villagers. Ignoring people’s viewpoints contributes to the elite’s characterization as ‘a minor ruler [who] plays critical roles and monopolizes power, resources, and society’ (Bayumi, 2004, p. 13).

Given this double standard, it is reasonable to wonder why Sarra village’s land annexation in 2001 was completed rapidly for the advantage of elite, but Kafr Qallil village’s protests against the annexation since 1997 had no response until 2018? The annexation of 2016 was also suggested without consulting the communities, but the legal processes for Nablus expansion in 1987 were not finished until 2001, with full support from the Ministry of Local Government to make it lawful. An argument demonstrates that elites are those in positions of power who can influence political outcomes and who work closely with state administrative elites (López, 2013). Nablus mayors pushed their political agenda on the villages that had been or were about to be annexed. This situation is like that of Ghana and most African countries, where expansion has not been shaped by professional practice or community people’s preferences but rather by the political elites (Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2016). From 1996 to 2013, the approval of the Nablus master plan was postponed. This strategy was nonetheless successful and sustainable due to Nablus mayor’s influence as a member of a political and family elite, and it provided answers to the concerns voiced about the nature, control and advantages of growing the Greater Khartoum region (Ahmed, 2010).

The villages annexed to Nablus Municipality boundaries were unaware of the laws or the impacts of land annexation (interview with Helayel, 2016), lacking knowledge, without resources and capital (interview with Dweikat, 2019). As villagers were not among the ‘business elite’ (López, 2013), they were unable to invest as landowners.

The powerful individuals participated in the land annexation process and managed several initiatives and services in annexed villages, including the two popular housing projects in Rafidiya and 'Askar villages. This supported the urban politics theory, which postulated that effective authority in city politics requires the formation of alliances between city representatives and wealthy societal actors (Rast, 2007). Here, certain municipal members formed alliances with wealthy Nablus city people and assisted them to acquire land parcels in these projects.

'Wealthy, and influential people bought lands in the industrial area in eastern villages before land annexation done in 1963, to benefit from rising prices after annexation' (interview with Dweikat, 2019). 'Services were offered in the land that was annexed in 2001, other projects were launched nearby, and as a result, prices increased, and investors received enormous financial returns' (interview with Turabi, 2017). The fact that some of these investors had political connections, were wealthy or were influential in the community confirmed that the elite is important to urban changes and regeneration for the benefit of a select group of powerful people and stakeholders, with little to no participation from the underprivileged or the area's original residents (Ngwabi, 2009). 'Special individuals who resided in the annexed land were given some services, such as Nablus mayor having a street opened and paved if he lives anywhere' (interview with Sa'adeh, 2017), it supported the elite theory, according to which people are distinguished from other people based on their possessions, income, positions of power and leadership skills (Ngwabi, 2009).

Newspaper announcements, meetings with the Ministry of Local Government, correspondence with institutions involved in the Nablus expansion to resolve the legal issues of the 1987 expansion, the success of any expansion, and the denial of Kafr Qallil village residents' objections—all these events highlight the importance of the elite in the Nablus Municipality expansion's success.

Finally, the political, social, administrative, wealthy families and military elite all had a significant impact on the process of expansion through land annexation. The head of the Palestinian Authority, ministers, district governors, mayors, city engineers, mukhtars and villages' councils members were among these powerful figures.

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Notes

1. Land annexation is the process that transfers land from towns and villages to cities (Nacker, 2005).
2. Al-Mukhtar: A person who manages the affairs of the village, and he is chosen by the residents of the village, under the supervision of a government official such as the director of the district or the Qa'im Maqam (The Ottoman Empire. States Law of 1864).

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