

Khan al-Wakalah



Courtesy of UNDP/PAPP

Palestine is frequently considered not only the cradle of civilizations and religions but also of cultural tourism, as exemplified in the long tradition of pilgrimage to holy sites. The writings of early travelers and pilgrims are the first comprehensive documentation of the various spiritual, intellectual, and social activities, customs, and traditions that have distinguished Palestine over the centuries.

These sources also suggest that cultural factors motivated many of these pilgrims.

In cultural tourism, the material presented to tourists facilitates human interaction and allows visitors to explore how other cultures create their surroundings, develop community, and maintain identity. Simultaneously, it is an ideal channel to exemplify the human concept around which modern development relations revolve; it is a dynamic activity that affects all economic activities.

Despite the diversity and relatively high number of cultural tourism development interventions in Palestine, tourism requires additional assistance. Regardless of major achievements, there is still a lack of central stimulation of new types of tourists: tourist facilities were not expanded, nor was the cultural environment properly exploited to attract new types of tourists besides religious tourists. Moreover, investors in the Palestinian tourism sector could not sufficiently develop their investments in the Palestinian governorates due to the obstacles presented by the occupation. As a result, the generally religious nature of tourism in Palestine was more or less maintained. Unfortunately, the occupation policies have a number of consequences for Palestinians, including limiting their ability to control their natural resources and access cultural heritage sites.

The ability to incorporate cultural and social elements into various sectoral development plans is one of the indicators of development. Tourism is one of the industries where the cultural fabric has served as a significant starting point in the face of global transformations, allowing it to develop and become the foundation of international market competition.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), cultural heritage is essential to individual and collective identity and memory, providing continuity between the past, present, and future. Humankind's ever-changing values, beliefs, knowledge,

traditions, and practices are reflected and expressed in cultural heritage. Cultural heritage also plays a vital role in the process of sustainable development as it improves social cohesion, diversity, well-being, and quality of life; supports cultural rights by preserving the heritage of minority and indigenous groups; fosters socioeconomic regeneration; increases the appeal and creativity of cities and regions; boosts long-term tourism benefits, and promotes sustainable practices. Consequently, historically significant cultural heritage sites are often irreplaceable, making them especially vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, or even destruction.*

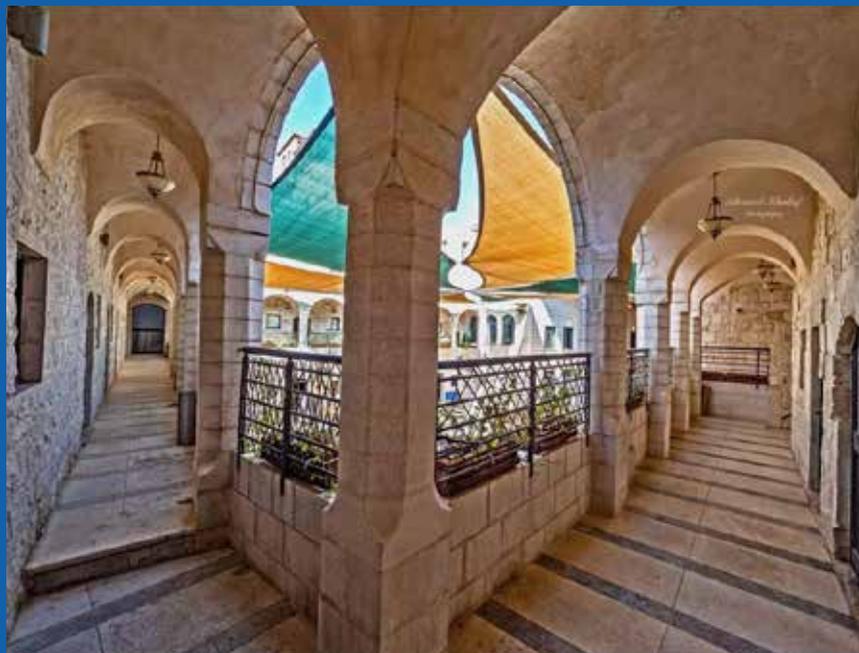


Khan al-Wakalah, the recently renovated 350-year-old site in Nablus which historically served as a caravanserai for merchants traveling from Asia to North Africa through Palestine. The site was damaged during a powerful earthquake that hit the region in 1927.

UNDP strives to preserve, protect, and promote cultural heritage through project activities in accordance with UNESCO Cultural Heritage conventions and any other national or international legal instruments that may impact cultural heritage use. Because these sites are endangered and may suffer from damage, inappropriate alteration, disruption, removal, or misuse, UNDP aims to preserve and safeguard cultural heritage, promote the equitable sharing of benefits from its use, and foster meaningful consultation with stakeholders regarding its preservation, protection, utilization, and management. A 350-year-old site in Nablus serves as a case study of such interventions.

Palestinians call the site Khan al-Wakalah, the Arabic term for “hostel” because traditionally, it served as a caravanserai for merchants traveling from Asia to North Africa through Palestine’s historical territory. After it was damaged during the powerful earthquake that hit the region in 1927, however, the site was neglected and fell into decay. In the mid-1990s, UNESCO and the European Union decided to launch a significant rehabilitation and renovation intervention at the site with the goal of improving the living conditions of local residents.

Thus, experts devised a strategy for the municipality to turn the site into a profit-generating center, ensuring that the restoration work has a long-term impact and is financially sustainable while safeguarding the site’s authenticity. Subsequently, the infrastructure around the caravanserai was renovated and



The corridors of Khan al-Wakalah.

upgraded to serve as a center for handicrafts, tourism, and cultural services, as Khan al-Wakalah became the first public-private partnership (PPP) model in cultural institution management and operation in Palestine.

The overarching goal of the EU-funded “Support to the Development of Cultural Tourism” project, launched in 2014 by UNDP/PAPP in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, was to contribute to national economic growth by developing the Palestinian tourism sector through revitalized cultural infrastructure and increased participation in PPPs. Moreover, the project aimed to contribute to efforts to conserve and protect cultural infrastructure as well as improve the potential of cultural and ecotourism and

creative industries for inclusive economic growth. In addition, the project endeavored to help raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage among the local population by preserving and providing the site with the needed infrastructure and facilities for cultural and social activities for the inhabitants and tourists.

Furthermore, on the job generation front, the project provided job opportunities for young professionals, promoting craftsmanship, tourism, and cultural management as well as improved engagement with the local private sector. Finally, the project aimed to contribute towards increasing the amount of inbound and outbound tourism by adding new touristic routes with a new concept of connecting the landscape with the environment,

the archaeological sites, and the historical buildings and increasing local residents’ income as they are enabled to provide tourist services.

The collaboration of all stakeholders in fine-tuning the interventions contributed to the success of the revitalization of Khan al-Wakalah, involving the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Municipality of Nablus, and the private owners of the sites.

Khan al-Wakalah’s rehabilitation was completed in 2017, with 11 stores renovated to meet the local economy’s needs and 21 rooms renovated to become a boutique hotel. The complex furthermore includes a nine-room guest house and several shops that sell traditional handicrafts such as olive oil soap and embroidery. Other stores house tourist information centers, agencies, and exhibition and conference facilities. In addition, there is a two-story restaurant and an old courtyard where travelers once kept mules. Therefore, in addition to the more than 1,600 working days created during the implementation phase, the project provided an additional 40 direct and indirect long-term employment opportunities to Nablus residents.

The process commenced with developing a new business management plan, followed by providing technical assistance to the Municipality of Nablus in forming a public-private partnership responsible for the guesthouse, cafeteria, and restaurant. In addition, the UNDP provided technical assistance



Khan al-Wakalah's courtyard where events take place.

to the Municipality of Nablus during the shop lease selection process. Subsequently, and in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the UNDP provided technical assistance for the provision of furniture and equipment.

To promote Khan al-Wakalah at its opening, a visibility campaign, which included a touristic itinerary for Nablus, was launched after the infrastructure of the complex had been completed and the equipment installed. Furthermore, UNDP provided the staff of the Nablus Municipality and the joint venture in charge of managing Khan al-Wakalah with on-the-job training and capacity development to ensure a high level of functionality at the complex. In addition, UNDP assisted in the start-up phase of the restaurant/café, guesthouse, shopping area, and other amenities.

UNDP has aimed to incorporate the following principles throughout this initiative to promote internationally agreed goals and international norms and standards as part of its development programming: environmental sustainability, a human rights-based approach, gender equality and women's empowerment, capacity development, and results-based management.

The project aimed to ensure sustainability in multiple dimensions (financial, institutional, and environmental) by involving beneficiaries, target groups, and stakeholders directly from the planning stage until the completion of activities and handover to local actors.

The project's social sustainability, or ownership, was based on developing a business plan

involving the local private sector in managing a cultural heritage site. UNDP targeted local NGOs, CSOs, and family-based initiatives in the business plan (e.g., Bedouins and women's associations). The project was carried out by strengthening local counterparts' sustainable systems and human capacities to internalize the participatory approaches and innovative ideas developed during the planning and implementation phases. Integrating international and local capacities in the conceptualization, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes proved to be an effective strategy for achieving synergy. Similarly, incorporating gender equality and youth-focused policies into the business development plan proved advantageous.

The project also conducted all activities and decisions transparently and inclusively, involving all relevant stakeholders and ensuring the project's institutional sustainability. To that end, the owners of the cultural heritage sites were engaged from the start of the project's planning phase and continued to play an active role – as members of the program steering committee – during the entire implementation of the activities, ensuring the project's financial and institutional sustainability. In addition, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Municipality of Nablus both played institutional roles in the project, ensuring the continuity of the Palestinian National Development Plans.

A number of lessons were learned during this project. For most Palestinian citizens, these

Khan al-Wakalah is a thriving cultural tourism establishment in Nablus that preserves heritage and fosters economic development while promoting cultural tourism in Palestine. It represents one component of the €5 million “Support to the Development of Cultural Tourism Programme” funded by the European Union and implemented by UNDP/PAPP in close collaboration with the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the private sector.



monuments are a bridge between the past and the present, symbols of their identity and sense of belonging amid challenges that threaten social cohesion and form a protracted crisis as a result of the prolonged occupation. The revitalization of Khan al-Wakalah has demonstrated the social



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power of operating sites; a strong connection was observed between neighborhoods and the old city of Nablus, with site operation and the provision of touristic services contributing significantly to these social dynamics.

UNDP was able to hone its knowledge of cultural tourism in Palestine, adopt new mechanisms with multidimensional objectives, protect sites, restore tangible Palestinian assets, and implement new revitalization principles as part of the learning experience in Khan al-Wakalah. Furthermore,

UNDP emphasized the anticipated development dividends and reduced barriers to private sector participation. The private sector and the local community are currently presented with numerous new business opportunities as a result of the implementation of this model.

The investment in cultural tourism fully aligns with the UNDP's current programming emphasis, the Transformative Resilience Framework. The three key elements of Transformative Resilience are Palestinian identity, self-reliance, and local ownership and

leadership. These elements can be strengthened at different levels: individual, family, community, regional, and national. This is a fundamental aspect reflected in UNDP's mandate in the State of Palestine. This framework significantly increases local ownership and social cohesion, bolstering national self-reliance and enhancing the leadership of national institutions to more effectively plan, manage, and invest in resilience and development. These elements were the core of the Khan al-Wakalah model.

Undoubtedly, this path is fraught with difficulties; however, national counterparts have made commendable efforts to revise, alter, and refine policy frameworks and are willing to continue their efforts. For instance, the most recent heritage and antiquities legislation carefully considered the need to strengthen the legal framework to support the concept of revitalization through private sector participation.

UNDP and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities have agreed on several strategic measures currently being monitored and implemented. The measures include increasing investment in the operation and management of cultural tourism and heritage sites, establishing national tourism destinations, and emphasizing local handicrafts.

The relationship between tourism and culture requires the development of diverse cultural fields. Consequently, tourism policies, regulations, and laws must be promoted to preserve the pattern of cultural heritage and local identity, as well as the

balance between tourism functions and adequate employment for the residents of these areas, with the provision of a cultural environment that takes into account architectural and social heritage.

Cultural tourism must be developed and activated to achieve development by establishing associations, raising awareness, and educating through publications, seminars, and conferences. When forming local groups or organizations of professionals, businesspeople, politicians, and environmentalists in order to promote cultural tourism, it is prudent to emphasize self-development rather than development imposed from outside the tourist areas.

The revitalization of the historical Khan al-Wakalah has been identified as a foundational pillar under the EU/UNDP "Support to the Development of Cultural Tourism" project. The Khan al-Wakalah model sought to demonstrate the social and economic potential of cultural heritage at the local government level, specifically at the Nablus Municipality. Despite Palestine's limited experience in forming PPPs for the management and operation of cultural heritage sites, as well as the limited system capacities and lack of a legal framework at the outset of this engagement, PPP was deemed the essence of the EU/UNDP's approach to unleashing the potentials of cultural tourism.

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TO SHARE



*UNDP Social and Environmental Standards: Standard 4 (Cultural Heritage).



My Golden Opportunity



By Sirin Al-Titi

Having stood the test of time, Khan al-Wakalah is now considered one of the holiest edifices in the Nablus area. Therefore, it's my honor to manage this Palestinian landmark along with my sisters.

My family's involvement with Khan al-Wakalah Hotel dates back to when my father, Munther Al-Titi, was awarded the contract to manage the establishment. The business eventually became a family affair, and now my sisters and I run it. To make it a success story, we work daily to bring back Nablus's rich cultural heritage. We make every effort to promote Nablus's historical presence and tell the city's story to visitors from all over the world, including Arabs and foreigners of many different nationalities.

In today's society, cultural and traditional biases make it extremely unusual for a woman to take charge of a project of this scale. But my sisters and I decided to break the mold and provide a fresh take on the "working woman" stereotype, at least here in Nablus. This even made working night shifts at the restaurant difficult, but we persisted and believed in our vision and eventually made it work. Being a good wife is as important to me as running a successful business, so I

made it a point to keep my work and home life in harmony.

Professionally, we have faced a number of challenges, including the intense competition in the market, which has compelled us to develop innovative business models to expand our margins and sustain the quality of our services. However, Khan al-Wakalah is a solid ancient institution that can hold its own against newer competitors. Our father, a prominent pioneer and industry veteran with years of experience in managing hotels and restaurants, has been a significant source of guidance for us throughout the turbulent times we have experienced.

The opportunity to manage Khan al-Wakalah Hotel has allowed me the freedom to try new things, step outside my comfort zone, and hone my skills. My time at Al-Khan has been marked by a wide range of feelings, including tenacity, stress, and extreme elation. The process of coming to know myself has been and continues to be overwhelmingly positive. This institution is also a family success story because it has helped us grow closer to each other in an effort to sustain this legacy. For this reason, I consider it to be my golden opportunity.