

What Makes a Nabulsi a Nabulsi? A Comparative Study of Women and Family waqfs in Nablus and Tarabulus al-Sham during the Ottoman Period

Beshara Doumani, Professor of History, Brown University

Nablus has been part of the Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, and Eastern Mediterranean worlds for many centuries. Yet, it seems that the primary identification of the ahali of Nablus generation after generation is with the city itself, especially during the Ottoman period. How is this sense of uniqueness—whether expressed through dialect, food, business practices, family connections, and shared memories—reproduced in daily life generation after generation? What makes a Nabulsi a Nabulsi?

In this brief intervention I suggest “being Nabulsi” is the historical product of a density of interactions between Nablus and its hinterland revolving primarily around the production, transformation, and exchange of key commodities such as olive oil, soap, cotton, and textiles. It is, furthermore, a result of the ways that family life is organized so as to facilitate this relationship between the city and its hinterland.

One of the best ways to explore the connections between political economy and the organization of family life during the Ottoman period is to analyze the status of women and female children in property devolution strategies. Property Devolution is a conscious and strategic act that reveals a society’s understandings of what constitutes family and how it should be organized and reproduced.

The family waqf is a sensitive barometer of attitudes towards family life, because it constitutes the most flexible tool at the disposal of individuals who wish to customize, so to speak, their property transmission strategy. Choices include what properties to endow and who the beneficiaries are. The endower can also specify conditions governing the distribution of revenues that will have different consequences depending on the beneficiary’s status—on whether, for example, the beneficiary is married or unmarried, young or

old, and of one generation or another-- thus, creating an internal and, often, gender-specific hierarchy and lines of authority. In short, family waqfs can be viewed as family charters or mini-constitutions that govern not only property relations between kin, but also the moral-disciplinary order of kinship.

Nablus is not unique in its uniqueness as a social space. In order to highlight how this connection between political economy and organization of family is the key for understanding the differences between regions, I compare the patterns of family waqfs in Nablus and Tripoli and make two arguments. First, that the inhabitants of two Arab urban centers located in the same legal (Islamic law), political (Ottoman Empire), and cultural (eastern Mediterranean) zones pursued diametrically opposed property devolution strategies and had very different understandings of what family is. Second, that this difference Nablus and Tripoli is related primarily to women's access or lack thereof, to agricultural property. Given this diversity, one can argue that nationalist and other ideologies are very limited in their ability to fully capture the richness of Nablus and its history.