

# A Win-Win Model for Replication

## Palestinian Cultural Heritage: from Preservation to Revitalization



By Walid Hasna and Motaz Dawabsheh

There is no doubt that the challenges facing Palestinian cultural heritage are enormous, specifically the preservation of cultural heritage sites such as historical buildings and monuments. As a result of the occupation and with the prolonged siege on Gaza, hundreds of sites have deteriorated due to having been neglected and abandoned, a situation that is frequently exacerbated by limited access and fragile financial allocations for preservation. This applies not only to sites located in Area C, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, but also to the centers of major cities and villages. Questions that come to mind include: Why are new service facilities proposed when cultural heritage monuments are deteriorating and remain unused? Or more precisely, why are historical village centers left to decay as new construction is planned, or taking place, for community centers, service facilities, and other institutions? Not only in the old city of Hebron – which was recently proposed for listing as a World Heritage Site – are a number of historical spaces closed and unutilized, this is also the case for sites located in the Old City of Jerusalem and others in cities throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

Efforts made by the government to place the preservation of historical sites on the national agenda are well appreciated, and the role of civil society organizations and NGOs is very significant.

However, there is a need to explore new mechanisms of response. The fact that historical sites remain unused should be considered a critical risk, and we must move strategically into revitalization dynamics.

Challenges are becoming increasingly apparent; they have been clearly identified and outlined in a number of studies. Solutions, however, must offer new platforms for the protection of Palestinian cultural heritage sites. Efforts must aim to unleash their productivity and increase their role within a greater national vision that acknowledges their contribution to the reinforcement of identity and to social cohesion.

Palestinian contemporary furniture designs introduced at Khan Al-Wakaleh in Nablus through a UNIDO - UNDP partnership.



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Thus, new development niches must be explored in the quest to fulfil the aspirations of the Palestinian people towards sustainable development while preserving heritage, and more sustainable and nationally driven initiatives must take into consideration the historical and geographical location of Palestine. But more importantly, conservation efforts must be framed as win-win drivers. We must move from a re-active to a pro-active mode, from preservation –which is indeed an urgent priority –to revitalization (taking preservation as a backup option).

Taking into account such considerations, UNDP's Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP) has preserved numerous Palestinian cultural heritage sites and has proposed a new model of revitalization to tackle an important question: How can we ensure sustainable preservation and regular maintenance of sites when we must operate within the context of harsh financial conditions and have limited resources available for culture heritage? UNDP has proposed an innovative approach for the operation and management of cultural heritage sites by encouraging partnerships among the public and private sectors, using public-private partnership (PPP) models. This initiative has been generously supported by the European Union and has targeted two key historical sites, namely Khan al-Wakaleh in Nablus, which had not been functioning for many years, even though investments had been made for its preservation; and the magnificent Maqam an-Nabi Musa in Jericho, a unique monument that plays a central role in history. It has shaped Palestinian national identity but unfortunately has been subject to years of abandonment, notwithstanding the annual *Mawasem* (seasonal festival) attended by a wide array of Palestinian institutions, specifically during the Easter season.



This EU-funded initiative was launched in full partnership and collaboration with Palestinian institutions that include the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and Nablus Municipality. It presents an integrated and coherent effort that aims to revitalize and change mindsets and introduce structural changes at the institutional level. To this end, historical documentation was utilized in the drafting of preservation plans, and operations and management strategies were developed to meet stakeholders' targets in terms of sustainable cultural, social, and economic outcomes. In addition, the need for new investment by the Palestinian private sector was acknowledged. It serves as a catalyst, while the authenticity of the sites and their integrity were given priority over commercial goals.

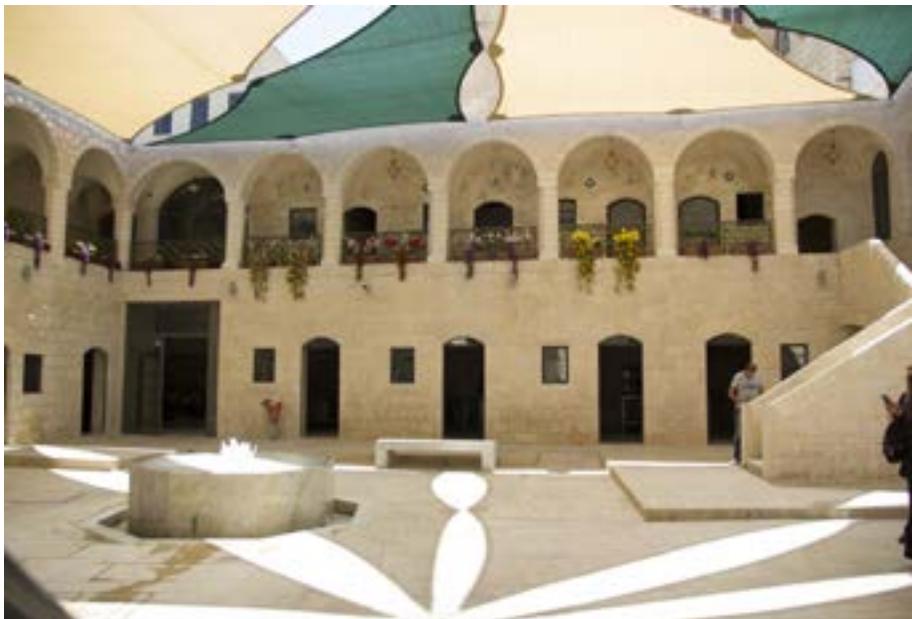
As part of this initiative, the selection of operators – albeit not an easy task – was well managed. Among the key constraints that had to be tackled were sustainable preservation and regular maintenance. Securing support and assistance for the operation and management of these sites is more difficult as it requires a substantial commitment to continued capacity assistance.

A number of strategic objectives can be achieved that include the sustainable maintenance of targeted sites and their preservation in accordance with internationally acknowledged best practices. This approach creates new permanent job opportunities for the local community; furthermore, it benefits the historical value of a site, as it becomes part of the overarching effort to create an attractive tourism map in Palestine that can cope with the growing demand posed by domestic and international tourism activities. Palestine has recently been classified as one of the top countries among the fastest-growing tourist destinations. At the level of the private sector, it has been vital to explore new investment opportunities, particularly regarding tourism and cultural heritage and the creation of new social enterprise platforms. At the level of Palestinian institutions, it is essential to efficiently and effectively manage the generation of revenues to facilitate serving new sites. To this end, revolving and matching funds must be secured for re-investment in order to enhance the

**The revitalization of cultural heritage sites is a positive asset that serves to safeguard their existence, strengthen a sense of identity, enhance social cohesion, create entertainment and social venues, generate jobs, increase expertise and know-how, and enrich education.**

national capacities for better oversight and supervision, and for the marketing of new touristic destinations. Ultimately, and in the long term, UNDP operates under the ambitious goal of reducing its critical dependency on donor allocations for the preservation of cultural heritage sites and historical buildings.

Khan Al-Wakaleh historical site in Nablus following rehabilitation and preservation works by UNDP with support from the EU.





Rehabilitation works at Maqam an-Nabi Musa, supported by EU through UNDP.

The institutional support of the Palestinian government represented a key stride, as it assisted in reviewing the existing legal frameworks and drafting legislation related to cultural heritage and tourism. It helped propose more efficient response mechanisms that reinforce the engagement of the Palestinian private sector while re-emphasizing the sites' authenticity, integrity, and historical values. Such steps are timely and required during this stage of finalizing the endorsement of the first Palestinian national cultural heritage and tourism law. The institutional support offers a capacity-building package to the involved Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities departments towards activating the role of cultural heritage sites in supporting tourism strategic objectives.

The revitalization of the Khan al-Wakaleh historical site, serving as a first model of this scope at the national level, is an experience that deserves replication and upgrading. As mentioned previously, the site had not been fully utilized for many

years despite genuine preservation efforts. Nowadays, the site is an attractive and productive destination, listed on the most popular tourism hubs, such as booking.com and others. It offers 20 permanent direct jobs for local Palestinian youth and is managed by the Palestinian private sector. It is worthwhile mentioning that much of the furniture was manufactured by local industries in the city of Nablus.

UNDP, together with the EU and the Palestinian government, is looking forward to the success of the other pilot model, namely, Maqam an-Nabi Musa. Currently, the preservation and rehabilitation works are under way, with an anticipated completion date of October 2018. The operations and management agreement with the private sector has been signed between the Ministry of Awqaf and a group of talented Palestinian youth entrepreneurs. Both historic sites are directly managed by Palestinian women, thus providing significant success stories for the empowerment of women in Palestine.

This revitalization initiative, with the valued support of the European Union, has attracted interested partners and internal financing institutions, with current discussions taking place towards mobilizing additional support for upgrading and replication.

Investment in cultural heritage sites and the innovative connection with the tourism industry constitutes a way to safeguard and preserve Palestinian monuments and the national heritage treasury. It reactivates the role of the sites in line with their original functions, placing emphasis on their authenticity and integrity. This effort entails a collaborative approach of synergy and dialogue with active institutions, tapping into their existing know-how, knowledge, and experience. It shapes new dynamics that enhance the value chain at all levels and in different forms, thereby improving technical preservation capacities and bringing them in line with international cultural heritage guiding principles. Such endeavors strengthen technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and reinforce national capacities to develop plans for the sites' operation and management. Placing the historical value of cultural

heritage at the heart of the process increases awareness of and advocacy for cultural heritage, enhances private-sector knowledge of details of such sites and practices, and encourages general participation in this social and economic responsibility for their preservation. Furthermore, we are leveraging for the role of cultural heritage as part of identity and development by introducing specialized forums in Palestinian textbooks. Last but not least, we call on Palestinian businesspersons in the diaspora to take note of and follow up on the emerging demand for preservation as a business-solidarity scheme.

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General view of Maqam an-Nabi Musa - a spectacular dome-covered monument in Jericho.

