



## Full Length Article

# Building a border-city university in occupied Palestine: Developing a cross-border “resistance economy” in practice

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## A B S T R A C T

Situating itself within recent debates on the possibilities of developing a “resistance economy” within a neoliberal and settler colonial context, this paper examines how one border-lying university – the Arab American University of Palestine (AAUP) – and the informal city which has developed around it, has leveraged private capital investments to not only address the educational and employment needs of Palestinians living on both sides of the border, but to become an alternative frontier of economic and urban development for Palestinians. Arguing that AAUP’s unique economic model of private investment in and through education reflects a highly innovative and flexible form of anti-colonial praxis as well as a unique model of a resistance economy in practice, it nonetheless argues that the capacity of independent start-ups in the surrounding area to adapt to, and withstand, economic shocks and border closures has been more limited. Demonstrating the more uneven and complicated role of private capital in not just kickstarting but sustaining economic, urban and national development in a frontier region under ongoing conditions of occupation, its findings suggest that the long-term developmental potential of this border-city university depends on the continued agility of the university and on increased levels of coordination, cooperation and consultation between it, local businesses and communities which now depend upon it for their survival.

## 1. Introduction

“[T]here’s a movie called *Field of Dreams*. Somebody decided to build a baseball field in the middle of nowhere and he, being a dreamer, everybody around him thought he was crazy. Why would you build a baseball field in the middle of nowhere? But he realized that if he had something that is different and that is attractive and that people need, they will later on come and invest around. It’s very much like what happened at the university. Even though I’ve lived in the Jenin area all my life, I’d never been to this area because it’s so remote and there were no roads leading here. But right now, clearly, this is the most important piece of real estate in the Jenin area. Many roads lead here, investments in real estate and otherwise are all around the university. So yeah, it is the same ... If you build it, they will come.” (Member of AAUP senior management 2022)

Border cities are generally not the norm (Doe, 2021), but in settler-colonial contexts where war and partition have resulted in the unilateral imposition of borders through land and communities, they are more commonplace. In Palestine, border cities are politically unstable and neglected spaces, susceptible to the superexploitation (Bornstein, 2002) of indigenous labour forces; multiple forms of slow violence through the placement of checkpoints and environmentally hazardous chemical industries, land dumps, sewage treatment and nuclear plants

(Stamatopoulou-Robbins, 2019); as well as more spectacular forms of spaciocidal violence (Hanafi, 2012) in the form of military incursions, raids and other border policing tactics. They are also, however, sites of creative enterprise, adaptation and resistance as local actors seek to leverage their precarious geopolitical position at a tightly regulated junction between two unevenly matched national economies not only to survive but to challenge and unsettle the borders which divide them.

Border-city universities provide a unique lens through which to interrogate patterns of creative enterprise, adaptation, and resistance at the border. Universities, after all, are not only sites of knowledge production (Hawari et al., 2019), but the physical and material locus of a knowledge-based economy where different types of knowledge, skills and expertise are produced and practiced on a collective basis (Madanipour, 2011). A common measure of city-ness, universities figure amongst the largest local employers wherever they are based, creating hundreds if not thousands of jobs directly and indirectly through the wide range of ancillary services (food, accommodation, transport, hospitality, etc.) they require (Goddard & Vallance, 2013), while at the same time producing new forms of interaction and exchange as well as of sociality and mobility on the local, regional and cross-border levels (McGahern, 2023). As such, border-city universities not only carry substantial developmental potential but have the unique power and potential to trigger the physical, social and economic transformation of

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border lives and landscapes more generally.

Focusing on the establishment of AAUP close to the Green Line (the 1949 armistice lines that constitute Israel's de facto border) in 2000, and the subsequent emergence of an informal city (Roy, 2003) around it, this paper seeks to extend scholarship on frontier geographies (Weizman, 2007) and frontier urbanism (Pullan, 2011) in settler colonial contexts to consider the "developmental potential" (Lithwick & Gradus, 2010: ix) of a contested frontier for local indigenous actors. To do this, it engages with recent conversations within the field of Palestinian political economy on the possibilities of developing a viable resistance economy within a neoliberal settler colonial context (Nakhleh, 2012; Tartir et al., 2012; Dana, 2020a & 2020b; Turner & Shweiki, 2014; Tabar & Salamanca, 2015; El Zein, 2017; Arafeh, 2018; Seidel, 2019).

To support its analysis, it offers a working definition of a resistance economy as: *a reorganisation of economic institutions and activities in any way that challenges the principles of separation, isolation and control upon which the logic of settler colonialism is based, and that empowers local communities to maintain or develop their capacity to be economically self-reliant now and into the future*. Central to this working definition is an understanding of resistance as an open-ended, unpredictable yet long-term process of local capacity-building that results in: (1) alternative modes of production; (2) redirected patterns of local consumption and spending; and (3) increasing capacities of self-sufficiency and endurance in the face of external challenges and changing circumstances.

This study is underpinned by two periods of fieldwork in spring 2019 and autumn 2022 spanning three months in total. Data collection comprised over 45 semi-structured interviews with respondents in 4 different sample groups (AAUP senior management, staff, students, and local business owners), as well as ethnographic observations on and around the campus across both periods. Interviewees were selected using the snowballing method and comprised a range of ages, genders, places of origin and socio-economic background. Names have been withheld to protect the anonymity and professional security of interviewees. Applying its findings to its working definition of a resistance economy, it argues that while AAUP's unique economic model of private investment in and through education satisfies all three of its required features in practice, the informal city which has developed around it does not, suggesting the more limited long-term utility of private capital in buttressing and buffering its border economy from economic and political shocks.

In advancing this argument, this paper has several wider aims: first, to expand conversations on the possibilities of developing a resistance economy in contested, neoliberal, settler-colonial contexts beyond its current pre-occupation with small-scale pop-ups in the agricultural and food production sectors to a broader mix of economic scales and sectors; second, to shift the territorial scope of conversations on economic resistance, which hitherto have been confined by the limit of recognized or imposed borders (notably the Green Line or Israel's Separation Barrier) to consider border-adjacent and cross-border forms of economic activity initiated and led by Palestinians; third, to query the emancipatory potential of private capital investments in transforming local lives and communities; and, fourth, to question the extent to which economic and political disengagement from prevailing structures of repression and control is either realistic or necessary in kickstarting a local resistance economy in practice.

The paper proceeds as follows: section one outlines the conceptual framework used; section two discusses how private capital investments have been leveraged to establish the university and overcome obstacles to its development; section three discusses how the university provides an alternative source of higher education to students living on both sides of the border and the challenges it has faced; and section four outlines the rapid urban development of the surrounding area and the economic challenges of urban informality that have accompanied it. The final section concludes with a review of key findings and their implications for the study of economic resistance in settler colonial contexts more generally.

## 2. Conceptual framework

The concept of a resistance economy, broadly defined as a form of "anti-colonial economic consciousness and practice" (Dana, 2020a, p. 192), emerged amidst ongoing debates among Palestinian scholars and activists about how best to localise approaches to economic development in Palestine. More specifically, it seeks to identify ways to liberate Palestinian economic potential, from the "repressive interplay of neoliberalism and colonialism" (ibid) which have to date blocked meaningful and sustainable economic development of Palestine.

Building on a rich body of critical scholarship on the political economy of the OPTs since the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation of 1993, these contributions highlight the ways in which various international-led "economic peace" (Nagarajan, 2015, p. 77) measures has served not only to undermine and skew Palestinian economic potential, but to conjoin the Palestinian and Israeli economies, reduce Palestinian economic autonomy, and enable a state of enforced structural dependency on Israel and international donors (Haddad, 2018; Turner, 2015) "whereby Israel became the key determinant of the fate of Palestinian development, thus affecting the socioeconomic formation and well-being of the society at large" (Dana, 2020a, p. 193).

Restrictive measures and conditions imposed by Israel and international donors alike have resulted in a stilted, export-oriented formula of economic growth which has tied the Palestinian economy "to Israeli demand and labor exports rather than to domestic demand and employment" (Farsakh, 2016, pp. 59–60). This has not only enabled the continued exploitation of Palestinians as a pool of cheap labor in Israeli towns and settlements on both sides of the Green Line reflects (Farsakh, 2016; Khalidi, 2016), but has contributed, as Sara Roy (2007:33) argues, to a process of "de-development" which is unlike "underdevelopment" in that it entails "the deliberate, systematic and progressive dismemberment of an indigenous economy by a dominant one, where economic – and, by extension, societal – potential is not only distorted but denied".

Recognising the corrosive grip of settler colonial and neoliberal frameworks in determining Palestinian futures, scholars and activists have advanced calls for a process of development from below" (Samara, 2005), advocating specifically for the development of "localised strategies structured on the principles of resistance" (Dana, 2020a, p. 194). Building on a rich history of trade-union activity, commercial strikes, boycotts of Israeli goods, labour walk-outs, as well as various grassroots practices of *sumud* (steadfastness), the concept of a "resistance economy" seeks to recognize and develop Palestinian economic agency as part of a broader emancipatory development framework (Tartir, 2015).

A relatively new concept, however, the notion of a resistance economy remains underdeveloped both in terms of its defining characteristics and "its applicability and adaptability to the complexity of the OPT's context" (Dana, 2020a, p. 194). This has, this paper argues, resulted in 4 main issues relating to: (1) the types and scales of economic activity considered, (2) the territorial scope of analyses, (3) the accepted utility of capital within it, and (4) levels of viable or possible disengagement from Israel and international donors.

### 2.1. Types and scales of economic activity

In an early study of a resistance economy in action, Rayya El Zein (2017) observed a preoccupation with the role of Palestinian workers within Israel's economy. Arguing that calls for the withdrawal of Palestinian labor from exploitation in the Israeli market – what Adel Samara (2005: 136) calls *insihab* – first need to consider the availability of alternative sources of local employment within the OPTs, she turned her attention to an analysis of a small-scale agritech company called Amoro Agriculture, Palestine's first Palestine-owned and -run mushroom farm, as an example of an alternative model of economic development, and of a resistance economy in practice. Addressing important

gaps in the scholarship, El Zein's study nonetheless noted the existence of a certain "romanticism that surrounds the land and the farmer in discourses of Palestinian struggle" (El Zein, 2017, p. 7) which continues to shape the direction of research on resistance economies (Latte Abdallah, 2022; Seidel, 2019). This heavy emphasis on agriculture as "the last frontier of resistance" (Fraihat, 2022; Sansour & Tartir, 2014) has resulted in an overly narrow focus on small-scale economic ventures in the agricultural and food production sectors to the neglect of others. It is by extending analyses of resistance economy to a wider variety of economic sectors, both in type and size, that the wider utility and relevance of the concept itself can be further probed.

## 2.2. Questions of territorial scope

Palestinian political economists have rightly critiqued the Oslo model for not only entrenching corruption within the Palestinian Authority (PA) but for diverting, for a period of time at least, the Palestinian liberation struggle to neoliberal institution-building (Khalidi, 2016; Khalidi & Samour, 2011). Despite the obvious failure of the "two-state solution" to deliver either a Palestinian state or peace, scholars of economic resistance and of Palestinian political economy more generally have remained attached to a narrow territorial scope of enquiry focusing primarily on the West Bank. The neglect of economic interactions between Palestinians living on both sides of the border (Burton, 2015) reflects a broader failure by mainstream economists to take the structure of Israel's settler colonialism into account as others have noted (Tabar & Salamanca, 2015, p. 15; Farsakh, 2016, p. 56). Of the small number of cross-border economic analyses which exist, most focus on the one-way flow of Palestinians day labourers from the West Bank into Israeli towns and settlements, and, to a lesser extent, on Palestinian citizens from Israel who enter the OPTs in search of jobs, education as well as affordable goods and services (Forte, 2001; McGahern, 2023). Forms of Palestinian creative economic industry, if they are recognized at all, stop at the border. This limited territorial scope results not only in a diminution of Palestinian agency but in a limited and selective view of emerging forms of political economic action and, crucially, of economic resistance. By expanding the territorial scope of analytical analysis to, and across, the border, different forms and models of resistance economies can be identified.

## 2.3. Capital as a dirty word

The repressive interplay of settler colonialism with neoliberalism since the Oslo Accords of 1993 has resulted in an enduring skepticism about the role of capital in the Palestinian liberation struggle. While most discussions of economic development in Palestine recognize the relative impossibility of sustainable development so long as Israel's occupation continues, scholars have nonetheless increasingly recognized the need "to think about forms of development that can provide the necessary material needs for Palestinians to resist Israel's enduring settler colonialism" in the future (Tabar & Salamanca, 2015, p. 15).

Building on the work of Mushtaq Husain Khan (2005: 71) who argues that "a period of capitalist growth is a necessary intermediary step toward establishing a meaningful, equitable distribution of resources in poor countries, generally, and in Palestine, specifically", El Zein (2017: 11) argues that "[t]o embrace the view that positive roles can be imagined for capital ... is not to blindly accept the flawed development or aid models imposed on Palestine" but rather to seriously consider the extent to which capital, and capitalist transformation, may play a role, albeit an intermediary step, in empowering Palestinians to develop the capacity to form alternative means of production of their own.

A more cautious approach to the utility of capital is, therefore, required. This involves expanding our analyses beyond a singular focus on "Oslo's economic giants" (Dana, 2020b) and the "comprador class" (Advani, 2017, p. 16) of mega-rich Palestinian capitalists it has created, to consider a broader cross-section of Palestinian business people and

entrepreneurs who may be enticed by the "seductive promises" of neoliberal restructuring (Clarno, 2017), and willing to operate within the constrained "structural context of PA-business cronyism" (Dana, 2020b), but who may, nonetheless, be seeking broader local and national advantages from it. This, in turn, requires closer examination of the capital investment strategies that these actors pursue and identifying who, exactly, benefits from them and in what ways. In other words, re-focusing our attention on not only the types of investment strategies that are employed, but the impact their strategies have on local communities through, for example, the creation of new jobs, housing projects, infrastructures (or lack thereof). It should also involve consideration of different forms of capital development beyond the economic field of capital (assets and profits) to the social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital that they stimulate, as well as the wide range of capital accumulation strategies that indigenous actors adopt and pursue not only to benefit from them but to survive and improve their lives (McGahern, 2023).

## 2.4. The development-dependence bind. Is disengagement possible?

Palestinian economist Yusuf Sayigh famously argued that "meaningful and far-reaching development cannot be achieved, or even sought, under the conditions of dependence-cum-dispossession" (cited in Tabar & Salamanca, 2015, p. 16). As such, the extent to which Palestinian economic ventures can either disentangle themselves from or avoid being entangled in Israel's matrix of control (Halper, 2000), remains a subject of considerable debate.

In 2018, alarmed and frustrated by the Trump administration's "Peace to Prosperity" plan (Iriqat, 2020), the PA introduced an Economic Disengagement Plan (EDP) "to reduce the dependence of the Palestinian economy on Israel and build a resilient economy by adopting a development model that consists of a number of pillars, including creating clusters of development in agriculture, industry and tourism, diversifying Palestinian imports and building a knowledge economy" (Fraihat, 2022, p. 1705). This plan, however, accepted the necessity of working within signed agreements and established protocols but suggested a phased approach to developing economic independence gradually and incrementally.

While some critics of the EDP may see this as a watered-down or "too-little-too-late" approach that is unlikely to achieve political and economic independence from Israel, Fraihat (ibid) convincingly argues that "it can significantly contribute to Palestinians' somood (steadfastness) on their own land, build resilience and advance resistance against the Israeli occupation." This insight can be broadened out further: in considering any Palestinian model of economic development as a model of economic resistance, two things are required: first, an acknowledgement of the struggle for economic independence as a process, rather than a pre-existing condition, and, second, a closer examination of local grass-roots capacity-building, that is the development of ordinary Palestinians' capacity to gain greater levels of control over their economic choices and futures.

Taking into account these four key points of conceptual tension – the types and scales of economic activity considered, the territorial scope of analysis, the accepted utility of capital, and levels of possible disengagement – this paper adopts a working definition of a resistance economy as a *reorganisation of economic institutions and activities in any way that challenges the logic of settler colonialism (founded upon the principles of separation, dependence and control) and that empowers local communities to maintain or develop their capacity to be economically self-reliant now and into the future*. To assess the extent to which the label of a resistance economy holds true, the following three key characteristics or factors are proposed which reflect the basic premise of "anti-colonial economic consciousness and practice" (Dana, 2020a).

1. Alternative modes of production (of goods, services, knowledge, expertise, labour and/or spaces);



2. Redirected patterns of local consumption and spending; and
3. Increasing capacities of self-sufficiency and endurance in the face of external constraints, obstacles and changing circumstances.

The remainder of this paper interrogates the extent to which AAUP's model of economic investment and development upholds these characteristics of a resistance economy in practice.

### 3. The roots of a "crazy idea"

AAUP is located 15 km southeast of Jalama checkpoint, and 8 km southeast of the city of Jenin (Fig. 1). Situated at the southern tip of the Marj Ibn Amr valley which extends upwards and across the border into Israel's lower Galilee region, it lies approximately 45 min' drive from both Nazareth (the largest Palestinian city in Israel) and Nablus (the largest city in the northern West Bank), via Highway 60 (in red) – an ancient trade route bisected today by Israel's Separation Wall and Jalama checkpoint which funnels traffic across it.

Following the *Nakba* (disaster) of 1948, the Jenin area, a regional hub for agricultural production and trade (Doumani, 1995, p. 31), was cut off from its economic and social base by a highly securitized border (McGahern, 2017) and transformed into a marginalised periphery of the West Bank. Rising levels of unemployment and poverty triggered processes of rural-to-urban migration which accelerated following Israel's military occupation in 1967. The designation of border-lying lands as "closed areas" subject to mandatory land confiscations and house demolition orders, as well as orders restricting the sale of land to Palestinians and redesignating inaccessible areas as "state lands", forced many Palestinians to abandon their lands and seek wage labour in Israel (Khamaisi, 1999, p. 177).

Transformed into a frontier "perched on the edge of core states [but] not fully incorporated into their zone of control" (Ron, 2003, p. 9), the Jenin governorate – one of the largest Palestinian governorates in the West Bank – underwent relatively few efforts to "settle" it. Of the 250

illegal settlements and outposts established across the OPTs since 1967 (OCHA, 2017), 6 are located in the Jenin district (most of which are located inside the Green Line and Israel's Separation Wall). Attempts to penetrate the heart of the region were limited to 2 Jewish settlements established in the 1980s but dismantled in 2005 for "security" reasons (IPF, 2023). A "poorly regulated arena of state action" (Ron, 2003, p. 16) the Jenin area remains not only a mostly "unsettled" frontier but an "unfinished region whose potential remains to be realized" (Lithwick & Gradus, 2010: ix). Attempts to govern this "chaotic," "erratic" and "unpredictable" (Weizman, 2007, p. 8) frontier, and to determine its future, have resulted in new forms of exclusionary surveillance (Handel, 2011) based on the principles of separation and control (Gordon, 2008), as well as new forms of political and economic resistance.

Following the first Intifada (uprising) of 1987–1993, a new permit regime, together with a new system of checkpoints, tightly controlled the mobility and economic opportunities of local Palestinians. Then, with the Oslo Accords of 1993, the structure of Israel's occupation shifted towards a new "administrative model of indirect rule" (Berda, 2017, p. 25). Control over the West Bank became territorially fragmented and responsibility for the everyday management and provision of basic services to Palestinians (such as education and ordinary policing) was outsourced to the newly created PA (Gordon, 2008). As part of this new "matrix of control" (Halper, 2000), the West Bank was divided into three administrative areas: Area A (containing the main Palestinian cities, over which the PA has responsibility for all matters); Area B (where the PA is responsible for civil matters while Israel retains security control), and Area C (the largest of the three areas containing illegal settlements, border areas, major road networks, as well as natural resources over which Israel retains full control).

As a result of Oslo, the Jenin area became a region of relatively large but isolated and fragmented Palestinian enclaves (Clarno, 2018, p. 323) surrounded and separated by a web of Area C areas - notably border-adjacent territory and key sections of Highway 60 – where it remains extremely difficult not only to move and develop but for

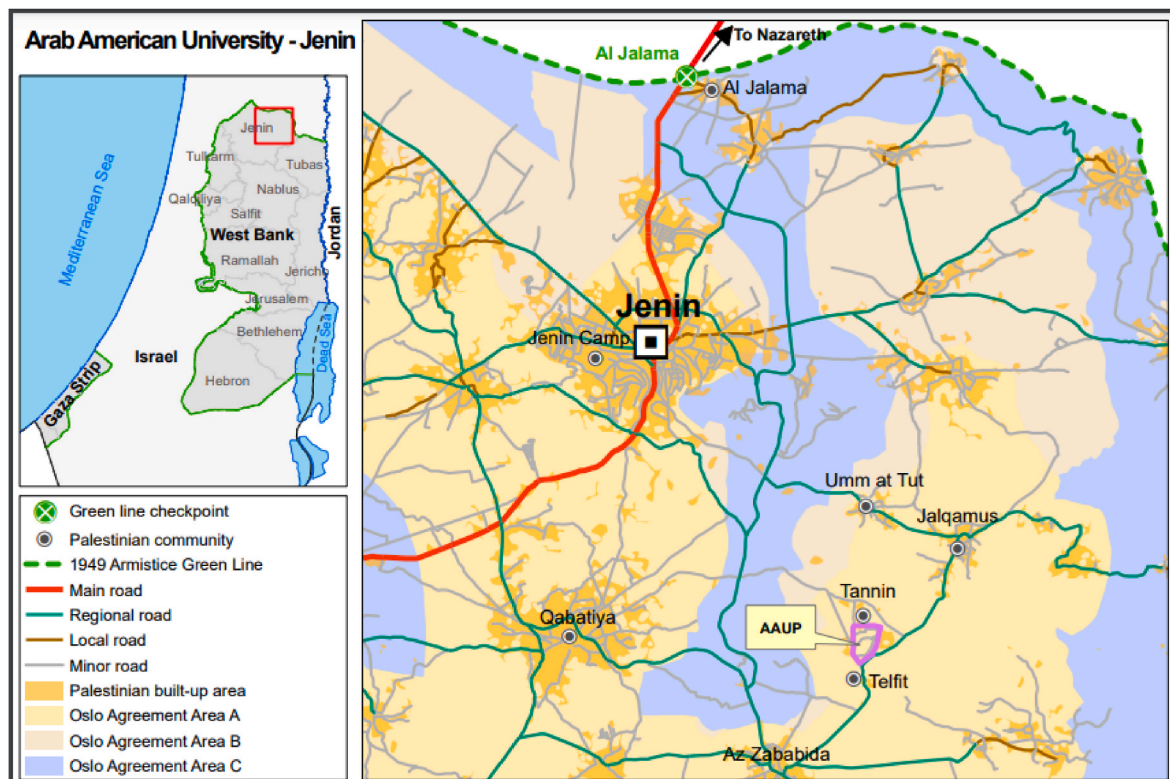


Fig. 1. Location of AAUP (source OCHA).

Palestinian policemen, who are prohibited from travelling through Area C areas while armed or in uniform, to undertake ordinary law enforcement duties.

It is within this context of isolation, impoverishment, fragmentation and limited authority that the decision to establish AAUP in Jenin was considered by many to be a “crazy idea” as underlined by the quote at the start of this paper. As another staff member recalled:

“There was no economy here. Nobody said anything about Jenin. It’s like they considered Jenin was like a small village with no internet, no electricity, no transportation, nothing to mention or to care about ... and no planning for the future, only living day by day.”

With over 50% of the male working force in the Jenin district working as construction workers, cooks, gardeners, and day labourers in Israel at that time, compared with 35–40% of Palestine’s employed labour force more generally (Shahin, 2005, p. 186), the brain drain caused by decades of out-migration of skilled labour and professionals was considerable. Reflecting on the lack of roads, another added, “you had to go from Jenin to Zababdeh, and then come here to the university, or go to Jalqamus and then come here,” a round-about route on poorly paved village roads. Emphasising this sense of remoteness and inaccessibility, one board member reflected:

“[We] went to the Minister for Transportation and asked him to build a road to the university. In the beginning, the minister was like ‘This is a crazy idea! Who is building a university in this kind of situation with political issues we have and everything is closed? And who’s looking to get their education in the north? This is a very crazy idea’.”

### 3.1. The role of private capital

Ignoring the sceptics, as well as expectations that universities be located within established towns or cities (Goddard & Vallance, 2013, p. 1), the degree of financial capital and political clout needed not only to win over the doubters, but “to establish a university from zero”, as one board member put it, was immense.

This clout was generated by two key figures, Maher Irsheid and Yousef Asfour, “the one who owns the land, and the one who owns the money” as one university board member put it:

“[The Irsheid family] is the family that owns most of the land in the area, and he said he wanted a modern university ... And he was really honest, there was another motive which is that a university would increase the value of his land, which is legitimate, so he formed a company and gave the university 200,000 square metres [200 dunums], in return for shares in the company.”

With the site secured, financial backing came from Yousef Asfour, a Palestinian entrepreneur who made his fortune in Saudi Arabia as an import-export agent, but who, following the Oslo Accords of 1993, grew his fortune in Palestine through the establishment of several private companies focusing in marble and granite production as well as haulage and logistics (AAUP nd). One of Oslo’s new “economic giants” (Dana, 2020b) he not only participated in, and benefited from, rapid processes of neoliberal restructuring (Tartir et al., 2021, p. 2), he also directly leveraged personal contacts he had with Palestinian President, Yasser Arafat, and other members of the PA political-economic elite to green-light the construction of the university.

According to one board member, his political and economic standing “made it easier to get the paperwork going and to get the licensing of the university” approved. Reaching out to major figures in the local business community, other investors, eager to be part of this new collaborative effort to establish a new university in the region, joined the board of directors, offering finances, goods and services in return for shares in the university, now a registered company.

As an independently-financed, private economic venture with a

single majority share-holder – Asfour retains a 56% majority share and remains chairman of the board of directors (AAUP n.d.) – the university’s new board of trustees were able to proceed quickly with their plans. As one member of senior management put it:

“[D]ecision making process in the private sector is much smoother. If you are working within a governmental agency to get the necessary approval, you will have to break it into many different steps. While the private sector ... the project is yours. You are not waiting for somebody to finance or approve ... The private sector has better mobility, perhaps even better agility and flexibility, because they can actually take their decision on the spot ...”

The agility of the new university was immediately tested. On the day that AAUP was inaugurated, September 28, 2000, Israeli PM Ariel Sharon visited al-Haram ash-Sharif (Temple Mount) with over a hundred Israeli security personnel, triggering the Second “Al Aqsa” Intifada (2000–2005). The roads to Nazareth and Haifa were closed and AAUP was immediately cut off from the students it hoped to attract. Only 220 students, mostly from the local area, were able to access the university, intermittently, though many families, now without work, struggled to pay their tuition fees. Reliant on student tuition fees for its income, university investors were frequently called on to help cover the salaries of their employees.

When the Israeli army invaded and bombarded Jenin refugee camp in April 2002, the entire population of Jenin was put under lockdown for 2 years, during which local residents were subjected to regular curfews, arrests and targeted killings (Taamallah, 2021). One month later, Israel began construction of the first segment of its Separation Wall in Jenin (Assi, 2023) extending the infrastructure of Israeli control (Gordon, 2008, p. 23) over all aspects of Palestinian life (notably agriculture, health and education). Border closures and wider travel restrictions obstructed the ability of even the most local students and staff to get to campus. They also interrupted access to construction materials, university supplies, academic supplies (including such basics as paper and ink cartridges) which the university desperately needed (Yoder, 2020: 75–7). From 2000–02, water was trucked each day from neighbouring towns to campus on unpaved roads while their electricity needs depended on noisy electric generators.

The sheer scale of additional financing needed from local investors to keep the doors of the university open through its early years not only tempered any “seductive promise” (Clarno, 2017) of neoliberal restructuring but revealed, as one board member argued, that “the purpose behind establishing the university is not purely financial”, but also a national effort to serve the population in the area. “It’s a business model without the business benefits,” he explained, adding that, for Palestinian investors it became a “huge project where they don’t know what’s happening ... and they decided to put money in it, build it as a for-profit company, and did not distribute one cent until last year. No profit!”

By 2022, Palestinian shareholders had invested 100 million dollars into the university, tripling the value of the university’s capital assets to 300 million dollars. The scale and scope of this investment has not only allowed the university to survive but to rapidly expand. Boasting a state-of-the-art campus (Fig. 2), containing 22 buildings and 16 faculties, AAUP is today almost entirely self-reliant in terms of water supply having sunk 3 wells on campus, built 2 water reservoirs, and established a rainwater harvesting system on the roofs of their new buildings as well as a water treatment plant using “in-house” expertise.

It also began to see some financial and “peace dividends” (Dana, 2020b, p. 252). In November 2007, following a concession agreed with Israel during the Annapolis summit to open Jalama checkpoint to vehicular traffic (Shamir & Blovosky, 2021), restrictions on cross-border movement were eased, and the fortunes of AAUP began to slowly improve as the number of fee-paying students able to enroll there increased (see Fig. 3 below). Today, AAUP provides higher education to almost 14 thousand Palestinians (27% of whom are from Israel, 30%



Fig. 2. Images of AAUP campus (source: McGahern).

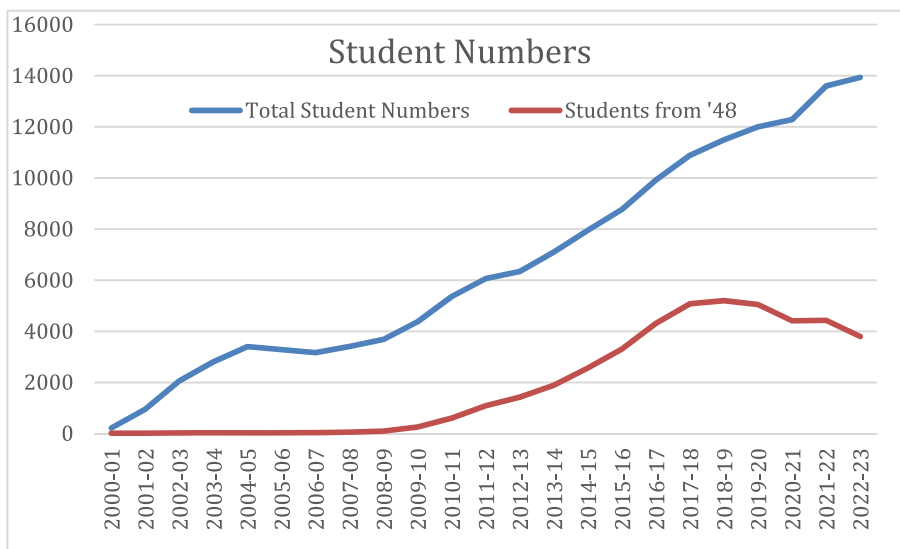


Fig. 3. Student Numbers from 2000 to present (Figure based on AAUP data).

from the Jenin district, and 43% from the wider West Bank). In addition, it provides direct employment to 1034 academic and administrative staff, 60% of whom are from the Jenin district.

#### 4. “The university of all Palestinians”

Before AAUP’s establishment, the only attempt to “develop” Jenin’s local economy was a project to establish an industrial “free trade zone” on the border near Jalama checkpoint. Illustrating the clear “repressive interplay between neoliberalism and colonialism” (Dana, 2020a, p. 192), this much-touted “mega-employment project” (Bahour, 2010) conditioned any Palestinian involvement in the scheme upon forming partnerships with external donors as well as economic cooperation with Israel. While promising to create a new frontier of economic investment, on offer to Palestinians was menial, low-paid, labor-intensive work with limited legal and environmental protections. Following increasing backlash from local farmers refusing to sell their lands to the PA, and Israel’s reoccupation of the West Bank in 2000, the scheme eventually fell apart (Bahour, 2010).

Seen against this backdrop, the economic model that AAUP proposed was very different. Offering immediate opportunities for education and skilled, professional work in an independent, Palestinian-owned and -run institution, it promised a localized and alternative socio-political

future for Palestinians inside Palestine that was fundamentally removed from the “economic prison zones” (ibid) of precarious factory work.

Branding itself “a home to all Palestinians” (Fig. 2) and “the university of all Palestinians”, as one board member declared, both its marketing strategy and its appeal are clearly rooted in its alternative model of economic investment and development in and through education which leverages physical proximity to the border with a holistic understanding of the university as an agent of social, economic and political change (Goddard & Vallance, 2013) as well as a practical, tailored offering of “demand-based”, “necessity-motivated” and employability-oriented degrees intended to equip graduates with the necessary skills “to contribute to the overall, sustainable national development” (AAUP, 2018).

##### 4.1. A local alternative

Before AAUP’s establishment, Jenin lacked a higher educational institution of its own, obliging students from the area to travel to other parts of the West Bank. This not only involved running a gauntlet of internal checkpoints but absorbing additional transportation and housing costs which few could afford. The presence of a university in the area not only helped reduce geographic and financial pressures but widen



participation of women.

“Female students, even though they did well in their studies, their families did not feel comfortable sending them away to ... live in either Nablus or Ramallah. Considering the security situation too, you know, and the security of roads, of travelling, due to the occupation clearly, problems with the army, checkpoints, et cetera ... the presence of the university in that locale enabled parents to feel OK with their kids commuting to university.”

Appealing to this neglected female demographic, which today makes up 58% of AAUP's total student body, AAUP also provides a very basic “opportunity for life”, hope and survival as one head of department who grew up in Jenin refugee camp remarked:

“I came from very poor family, my father was a farmer, he had nine children. You've been living in poverty, simple as that, but then you have a passion to survive ... Giving opportunities for those living in Jenin camp and those living in poverty is the only way to survive ... It is an opportunity for life. If you are offering this opportunity, you will save a life.”

Extending its remit beyond the field of education and the creation of alternative futures (Joronen et al., 2021), a central pillar of the university's mission is service to the local community. All students must do 100 h of community service as part of their degree. The university also provides a range of free and discounted services to the most disadvantaged members of the local community, such as free dental treatment and free physical therapy for those suffering from economic hardships, physical traumas and disabilities. Reflecting on the wide range of local community partnerships which the university is involved in, a member of senior management noted that AAUP's long-term mission is to develop a new “Palestinian ecosystem” for the Jenin area with the university at its heart, tapping into wider views of how universities can contribute to place-based innovations and regional sustainability processes more generally (Trippel, Schwaag Serger, & Erdos, 2023).

#### 4.2. An alternative for students across the border

While seeking to fulfil the educational, employment and healthcare needs of local Palestinians, AAUP also actively works to attract Palestinian students from Israel. Restrictive entry requirements at Israeli universities has meant that most Palestinian citizens able to pursue a higher education are compelled to travel abroad to Europe, UK, the US, the countries of the former Soviet Union and, from the mid-1990s, Jordan (Arar & Haj Yehia, 2016).

Given the logic of partition and the ongoing isolationist political geography of Israel's settler colonial project, universities in the West Bank were off the map for most Palestinian high school students who had rarely, if ever, stepped foot in the West Bank, let alone in Jenin (McGahern, 2023). Following the end of the Second Intifada in 2005, one academic tasked with promoting the AAUP among Palestinian schoolkids and their families observed:

“There were about 8,000 Palestinian students [from Israel] at that time studying in Jordan. We asked parents why they were sending their children there and not to us? They started reaching out to Arab educational and civil society centres, as well as to Arab MKs [Members of Knesset], to raise awareness. At the time, most had no idea we even existed. They knew nothing about us.”

To encourage the enrolment of Palestinian students from Israel, liaison offices were opened in Nazareth (since relocated to Haifa), as well as in the Negev and Golan, enabling university reps to visit Arab schools and municipalities and spread the word directly. Beyond drawing attention to the university's adjusted entry requirements which offer equal recognition to the Israeli *Bagrut* and Palestinian *Tawjihee* (high school matriculation certificates), the relative affordability of student life in Jenin was emphasized, as was the availability of single sex

dorms to accommodate cultural and religious sensitivities. By way of further encouragement, tuition fees, which can be paid in Israeli shekels instead of in US dollars or Jordanian dinars, were charged at the same rates as those charged to students from the West Bank, and a range of scholarships, discounted tuition, and partial exemption on tuition fees based on exceptional academic performance or extenuating circumstances are also available to them.

The two most prominent factors in encouraging students from Israel to enroll at AAUP were its targeted offering of “in-demand” degrees with high employability in Israel (McGahern, 2023), such as dentistry, nursing, allied medical sciences and, since 2020, medicine and pharmacy, as well as the growing ease of cross-border mobility following the opening of Jalama checkpoint to vehicular traffic in 2007 (Shamir & Blovosky, 2021).

#### 4.3. “Breaking the walls around Jenin”

Triggering a surge of students from Israel to AAUP from 2007 onwards (Fig. 2) also highlights the unique capacity of the university to provide new and alternative spaces of interaction for more meaningful community-building (Goddard & Vallance, 2013, p. 12). As one departmental head noted, before AAUP's establishment, “the only connection between us and our families inside was [when] they were coming just for the shopping.” This view was shared by one local student who observed:

“I think if I didn't come to the university, I would never meet any of my people inside. I think it's good to connect us. It feels like you know the people inside and they are part of us and we are part of them.”

The sense that “AAUP has broken this chain around Jenin” underscores the university's unique ability to not only challenge decades of enforced separation between Palestinians living on both sides of the border but also to challenge the isolation of Palestinians living in different isolated enclaves (Clarno, 2018) of the West Bank as another student from Nablus emphasized:

“Honestly, it's crazy, I'd never met anyone from Jenin ... Nablus and Jenin, they're actually close, 35–40 minutes between them, but there was no reason for me to come to Jenin ...”

It also reveals the role of the university in strengthening the psychological resilience of young Palestinians in overcoming patterns of withdrawal and self-isolation caused by the occupation:

“I think the university gives you the chance to go outside, learn, live your life, to interact with other people you didn't even know you would like in your life ... Here is not like where you live. Here you must have your reason to go outside. If you don't have a reason, you would stay in ... So when you go to university, they give you the chance to interact with other people, see new things and learn a lot of things you would not know if you stayed at home.”

#### 4.4. Navigating Israeli control measures

Despite the surge in Palestinian students from Israel between 2008 and 2018, their number began to level off and decline from 2019–20 (see Fig. 3). Two main factors explain this. The first is the increasing frequency of border closures at Jalama checkpoint from 2020 onwards. With the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in January 2020, Jalama checkpoint was closed, and remained closed for 1.5 years following an alleged “lapse in security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority” (Shamir & Blovosky, 2021) and continues to be closed on a regular basis in response to any militant activity in the area. This extended period of closure, and the increasing frequency of border closures and military raids since then, has not only had a “suffocating” effect on the local economy (ibid), but has had a considerable

impact on the cross-border mobility of students and on university life more generally, as one student noted:

“[W]hen there are strikes or when there are problems at the checkpoint or at roadblocks ... there are problems in our way. The Israeli Military stops or bans everyone from going here, from entering here, even Arabs. So, students who study here, what are they supposed to do?”

While the university quickly adapted to online teaching, the broader impact of economic hardship and segregation (Shamir & Blovosky, 2021) on university life and the student experience has been considerable. Demonstrating the extent to which Palestinian economic and social lives, and futures, continue to be dependent on, and determined by, Israel's system of checkpoints, this also shows the continued weaponization of border closure as an instrument of Israeli control and collective punishment, as a member of senior management observed:

“They can close the borders just like that. They have the power to do so, and they know it. We're taking a very big risk but it's worth it.”

The second key factor which explains the decline is the temporary withdrawal, from 2019-22, of Israeli accreditation from three of AAUP's largest and most popular degrees (nursing, occupational therapy and physical therapy) by Israel's interior and health ministries (Kubovich & Shezaf, 2022). A common tactic of interference which all Palestinian universities have experienced (Baramki, 1996), new conditions were demanded of AAUP which, as the head of one of the affected departments noted, made them think that “there is a plan to stop any student to come to AUUP”.

For many, the intent was to damage AAUP's reputation and appeal among prospective students. With 6 thousand Palestinian Israeli students enrolled there in 2018 alone – a figure which exceeded the number of Palestinian students studying at either Haifa University or Tel Aviv University that year – it had become, according to Israeli media, “the largest Arab Israeli campus in the world” (Bigman, 2020), reflecting a growing sense of shock and alarm at the unprecedented and increasingly normalized patterns of cross-border student mobility that they revealed (McGahern, 2023). Indeed, for one academic, the attempt to withdraw accreditation not only reflected Israel's fear of *tawwasul* – the development of closer personal, economic and political connections between Palestinians living on both sides of the border – but its opposition to any form of economic growth and prosperity for Palestinians that challenges, or has the potential to challenge, Israel's economic and security interests in the region.

While the border closures and temporary withdrawal of accreditation demonstrates the ever-present capacity of Israel to interfere, disrupt and determine the fate of Palestinian economic development (Dana, 2020a: 193), it also demonstrates the high level of agility and adaptability of AAUP in responding to these challenges. Moreover, it demonstrates the unavoidable necessity of engaging with Israeli authorities in order to survive, in spite of their increasingly adversarial stance towards them. “We don't have a choice,” as one board member flatly observed.

## 5. The making of a university city

In 2018, the Jenin Chamber of Commerce estimated that 929,000 vehicles entered into the area from Israel, bringing with them \$344 million a year in consumer spending (Shamir & Blovosky, 2021). The establishment of AAUP not only precipitated this surge of cross-border economic activity but created a new economic frontier (Schwake, 2020) of Palestinian investment. More than 104 dorms and tens of shops, cafes, restaurants, dry cleaners and other stores were built from scratch around the campus, providing essential services to thousands of students and staff, and generating additional source of income and employment in the area. This veritable boom in economic activity, which was essential to the university's capacity to function and grow, was

however, not anticipated and planned for.

“[T]he goal was to have 5000 students in the university ... The director of the board, his ultimate goal was to reach 6 thousand. We never thought we would reach 13,000 and I don't think there was plans for that, so I'm glad that the businesses stepped in, otherwise it would have been a disaster. I mean, if it wasn't for all the restaurants around the university and the shops, the students couldn't survive.”

Lured by the “seductive promise” (Clarno, 2017) of privatization and the possibility of making quick profits in a largely uncontested student market, private investors from Jenin, the West Bank, Israel, and the wider Palestinian diaspora provided the necessary finances to build. So significant has the level of private investment off-campus been that it outstripped investment into the university several times over:

“The investment of the people for the university is around 100 million dollars inside the university, but outside the university it's more than 600 or 700 million dollars.”

This process of local investment suggests, at first glance, a reversal in decade-long processes of capital accumulation through settler-colonial dispossession (Shikaki, 2021, p. 58), with flows of goods, materials, services and money flowing into the area for the first time, triggering a flurry of land purchases, real estate development and the relocation of many staff with their families to the area. In the absence of any master plans for the area, however, these financial investments resulted in a disjointed form of frontier urbanism (Pullan, 2011) defined by a rapid and *ad hoc* process of informal urban development (Roy, 2003).

The process of building and developing land, as well as establishing connections to water, electricity and sewerage systems is administered, separately, by two small local councils – Tannin and Telfit – led by the heads prominent local families and landowners (one of whom was related to one of the university's key shareholders) eager to fast-track land purchases and real estate development works. As one local business owner who undertook a 4.5 million shekel [£1 million] project to build a 57-room student dorm explained, the approval process was quick and straightforward, with construction itself taking less than a year to complete.

The relative ease by which ideas were materialized and converted into buildings reflect a *laissez faire* attitude to economic development as well as some level of elite collusion (Dana, 2020b, p. 3). While undoubtedly enabling the university to develop and grow at speed, this has also created three significant issues which both local investors, and the university, were ill-equipped to address.

### 5.1. Over-saturation of the market and unregulated price hikes

“Growth does not last forever ... You know how it goes with the economy, it goes like this [points up] and then it saturates. Some people gambled that the economy around campus will continue to grow at the same rate. That did not happen. The number of students on campus is stabilizing around some number and the opportunities are stabilizing too.”

Investment fever, coupled with a lack of adequate regulation to limit the number of new start-ups, has led, firstly, to an over-saturation of the market and monopolistic practices (Dana, 2020b), making it difficult for some businesses to compete. “Land was, of course, cheap in the past; however, in recent years, land has become not double, triple, but four or five times more expensive,” which, as one local business owner observed, has forced many small businesses out of business, while allowing a smaller number of big players to dominate the market.

Seeking to capitalize on what many assumed to be a captive student market, many local businesses also began to hike up their prices following decisions to orient their businesses towards one section of the student community that was assumed to be both the wealthiest and most dependent upon them – Palestinian students from Israel. “The cost of a



falafel sandwich in Zababdeh is now more expensive than in Ramallah,” one staff member joked.

Identifying that local students tended to commute or do their shopping elsewhere, most local businesses re-oriented their business models to those obliged to stay on campus for the week. As an owner of one convenience store remarked, “[our customers] are mostly from inside ... and they either demand a specific product or are accustomed to consuming it at home, such as XL [energy drink].” Arguing that they have no choice but to stock Israeli goods, some business owners have nonetheless made a more conscious effort to only stock Israeli goods where there is no Palestinian alternative available. Estimating that only 15 per cent of the goods they stock are sourced from Israel, one supermarket owner remarked that “these are often products that are not manufactured locally or do not have a local alternative ... We are trying not to have Israeli products in the supermarket unless there is no alternative to Palestinian products.”

### 5.2. Lack of adequate urban infrastructure

While the university’s infrastructure on campus is state-of-the-art, the infrastructure around campus has failed to keep up (Fig. 4). Electricity cuts are common, with many local businesses forced to rely on private electric generators. In the event of a fire, the nearest civil defence centre is 6 km away in the city of Qabatiya. A lack of adequate waste disposal system together with no street lighting and poorly maintained pavements has not only exacerbated health and safety concerns but affected the atmosphere around campus, as one student noted:

“The pollution is staggering. A lot of the apartments, surrounding the apartment itself, there’s a lot of trash ... it smells also sometimes ... there’s no organisation. Streets, sideways, there’s no places to walk, there’s no, let’s say, it’s not a friendly environment for students to go out and just hang out, let’s say.”

Increasing gaps in service provision have also exacerbated anti-social behaviour, as another student observed:

“It’s pretty noisy here. It’s just a bunch of students ... you’re talking about teenagers ... from 18 to 25. They want to experience life and they just want to go all wild. So, car noise, cafes, shouting, and stray dogs. People who drift with their cars and honk, play loud music ... It’s very annoying ...”

With no police station of its own, and the Israeli prohibition on movement of any uniformed or armed Palestinian police through Area C lands, which incorporates most major roads in the West Bank, including the roads between Jenin and campus (Fig. 1), the area depends on the small police forces stationed in the nearby villages of Jalqamous and Zebabdeh, both 2–3 km away. Even when they are called upon, “they usually need coordination and additional time before being able to move to the area” as one local business owner commented, adding that “in the event of a major quarrel ... the quarrel usually ends before the arrival of the security forces.”



Fig. 4. Images of development around campus (Source: McGahern).

The lack of reliable security in the area has become a problem not only for economic and social life in the area, but for the university itself as one board member noted:

“It’s become known as an area where there is no law ... And that I think is one of the main reasons why we have reduction [in students from Israel]. Last year one of our students was killed near the main gate and it spread all over social media inside 1948 [Israel], with people saying ‘I cannot send my kids to this university because they’re going to stay in this place and there is a risk’.”

### 5.3. Vulnerability to external pressures and market shocks

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the closure of Jalama checkpoint in January 2000 for a year and a half (Sadeh, 2022), AAUP’s informal city became a ghost town and local businesses struggled to survive. Stores, supermarkets and restaurants were among the worst hit. One local shop owner reported a loss of 5–6 thousand shekels [£1200–£1400] in fresh and refrigerated food in the first week of the pandemic alone, while another, who had previously been able to support his family through a small mobile kiosk selling free juice and coffee in front of the university, was forced to take up agricultural work in Israel again (having previously worked there for 5 years there before suffering a herniated disk):

“A full year with no work; a full year with the university closed; a full year with students studying online; a full year ... I never reported it, but I used to enter Israel, I did so through the openings in the wall (the separation wall, which is used by workers without permits). Weekly, I would go three or four days to work in agriculture; as you know, I have a house and a family.”

While most buildings stood empty during the pandemic, occupancy levels in even the most popular blocks, have failed to exceed 50–60% following the lifting of restrictions in mid-2021 with increased levels of competition recorded by many. To entice students back, or to stay, most landlords have reduced their rents. Many businesses have been forced to lay off staff. Others, unable to keep their doors open, have closed or are in the process of closing:

“I know of five shops that are for sale ... They are trying to get out with the fewest losses ... Our business is progressing, but it is so weak that it is difficult to cover our running costs and financial obligations.”

Tales of financial ruin and bankruptcy were widespread. While many expressed hope that their situation would improve in the future, some despaired while others expressed regret at their decision to invest in the first place:

“In my experience, investing in the university is a failed experiment, which means that I do not encourage it at all. Therefore, if someone consulted me, I would not encourage him to invest in the university

area. For example, for me, this restaurant cost 150,000 shekels [£33,750]. In the end, I will leave it and go.”

## 6. Lessons learned and the belated pursuit of city status

The preceding analysis reveals the considerable costs and risks involved in building a border-city-university from scratch in a settler-colonial context and under conditions of prolonged military occupation. It also, however, reveals the innovative and flexible strategies of private capital investment which enabled a “very crazy idea” to become both a functioning reality and an alternative, Palestinian-owned “fact on the ground” on a contested frontier.

The model of development in and through education which AAUP has pursued reveals both an “anti-colonial economic consciousness and practice” (Dana, 2020a) and a model of sustainable economic and national development that is anchored in a strategic assessment of previously unmet educational and employment needs on both sides of the border. Leveraging private capital investments to construct, resource and staff a campus from scratch and to buffer and buttress itself against major political and economic shocks, it has tailored and diversified its appeal to multiple categories of fee-paying students (from Jenin, Israel and the wider West Bank), maintaining its competitive edge in a crowded higher education sector. It has demonstrated “substantial developmental potential” (Lithwick & Gradus, 2010) of the frontier, redirecting patterns of spending and investment in the area. Breaking the chain around Jenin to a significant extent, it has challenged the logic of partition and developed closer relationships between Palestinian communities living on both sides of it. Notwithstanding major setbacks and ongoing challenges, it has demonstrated high levels of independent collective action as well as a capacity for agility and endurance in the face of external threats and challenges (notably in response to Israeli military occupation, the COVID pandemic, economic recession, and indirect forms of Israeli intervention and control) which makes this both a functioning and effective model of a resistance economy in practice.

The *laissez faire* model of unchecked, *ad hoc*, and informal urban development which private Palestinian investors off-campus have pursued, however, while stimulating the economic growth of the area, demonstrates a more exclusively profit-driven model of development, a narrower understanding of local needs and market opportunities, and a greater reliance on a single source of student revenue (particularly with regards income generated from students from Israel). The lack of financial backing, or central planning, has, in turn, exposed local businesses to a far greater level of vulnerability to political and economic pressures as reflected in the impact of unregulated price hikes, inadequate urban planning, and the increasingly frequent closure of Jalama checkpoint. The vulnerability of local businesses to the “erratic and unpredictable nature of the frontier” (Weizman, 2007, p. 7) has, in turn, meant that the informal city which has developed around the university lacks the necessary capacity for self-sufficiency and endurance in the face of external challenges and changing circumstances and, thus, cannot be currently considered a resistance economy in practice.

Mutually interdependent yet strategically unaligned, the long-term viability of both the university and the city around it requires a more integrated and coordinated strategy of economic, social and urban development that would work to buttress and develop both against future challenges. Recognising this need, the university’s strategic vision for the next five years has shifted to include the pursuit of city status. The pursuit of city status will require not only the buy-in of, and coordination with, a broader range of potentially competing if not conflicting political actors (including the PA and local government) but the development of a broader sense of “community stakeholdership” (Goddard & Vallance, 2013, p. 15) that extends beyond the priorities of the university’s shareholders, and fee-paying students, to the interests, needs and priorities of local businesses and community members as well.

While the attainment of city status appears to be a distant prospect at

present, this paper reveals the more complicated role and utility of private capital investments in both kickstarting and achieving sustainable national development in practice albeit in incremental steps. It confirms, for example, the view in the literature that “a period of capitalist growth is a necessary intermediary step toward establishing a meaningful, equitable distribution of resources” (Khan, 2005, p. 71), but that, without adequate planning and financial backing, the long-term capacity of private capital investments to weather political and economic storms and transform local lives and landscapes in the long-term is more limited. While the mixed fortunes of local investors on and off campus suggests a clear case of winners and losers, the transformation of building a border-city university from a “crazy idea” into a reality has fundamentally produced a new “fact on the ground” achieved through collective Palestinian action which, against the odds, has sought to “provide the necessary material needs for Palestinians to resist Israel’s enduring settler colonialism” (Tabar & Salamanca, 2015, p. 15) both now and into the future.

The complex, contested, and ongoing processes of economic, urban and national development discussed in this paper suggest several lines of future enquiry. In particular, it highlights the analytical as well as developmental potential of further explorations of alternative models of economic resistance at the borders and on the contested frontiers of settler colonial regimes.

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none

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