PhD Research Proposal

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**The weight of combat boots in Umm-Al Fahm, Jaffa and Nazareth: An ethnography of Policed life in Occupied Palestine**

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**Abstract**

This project aims to deeply understand the relationship(s) between the state and legal authorities, such as police, and indigenous people. Focusing on Palestinians citizens of Israel, this project aims to, ethnographically, uncover the complex relationship(s) between the Palestinian Community and the Israeli police. In doing so, this project will contribute valuable insights to the literature, adding to the body of knowledge on the subject, nourishing a scholarly curiosity in the Palestinian community, as well as in the unique position it occupies, marking the first ethnographic foray into spheres of violence, loss, pain, fears, and policed life in occupied Palestine.

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, policing has become an increasing area of public debate and critiques. Black lives Matter in the United States, European Anti Covid-19 Restrictions Riot, and The Hong Kong Democracy Demonstrations, have been generating a lot of discussion about the role of police in society, raising a concern regarding both Police’s direct and indirect violence, and regarding excessive law and order enforcement practices, especially used towards marginalized minorities.[[1]](#footnote-1) These discussions, however, have expanded greatly, and influences the discourse in many places around the world. The same in the Palestinian community in Israel, where the answers that follow a discussion about the role of Police, the way it conceived, or should be conceived, are very much controversial.

Looking at the front page of Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*: “Hours after the shooting in the Arab city of Umm Al-Fahm, four houses and three cars in the city caught on fire in suspected arson. Kids are crying. People are afraid to get out from their houses”.[[2]](#footnote-2) This story is not surprising, nor new. Reviewing a recent report by the *Aman Center for Safe Society*,[[3]](#footnote-3) raise up a very disturbing picture: 1635 Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel have been murdered since 2000. In 2015, for instance, 51 were murdered. Nothing changed in 2016, where 72 were murdered. Same in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Last year, 2021, 119 were murdered. In addition, data shows that since 2000, 68 Arab-Palestinian have been killed by the Israeli police. Most of these cases were carried out by firearms. Getting up every day to hear about the next murder, became a usual story of the Palestinian society in Israel. If a week goes by without hearing about a violent incident, that would be the exception.

Despite these high numbers of murders, these cases are not properly handled neither by the judicial system nor by state authorities.[[4]](#footnote-4) The number of femicide cases, for instance, soared in the past decade (2011-2020), reaching a horrifying peak: 95 Arab-Palestinian women in the Palestinian community in Israel were murdered, over 50 percent of the victims’ situations of domestic violence were known to welfare authorities, and 33 percent had filed a police complaint previously.[[5]](#footnote-5) Femicide, for some, is a distinct crime.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet, it is part of a broader increase in violence and murder cases in the Arab-Palestinian society in Israel, what left without a solution by the Police, nor by other state authorities.

Despite these empirical data mentioned above, daily events in which police officers harm Palestinian citizens, and historical skepticism towards police, arguments in favor of more policing currently dominate the Palestinian discourse as the desired solution and calls for law enforcement and criminal law have grown louder, the police is an integral part of it.[[7]](#footnote-7) Palestinian Knesset members and human rights actors in Israel, repeatedly call for more police intervention to save Arab-Palestinian lives.[[8]](#footnote-8) Day after day, complaints arrived at the police stations by members of the Palestinian community.

However, in recent years, there is an increase in critical discourse within the Palestinian community, adopting the American discourse calling for abolition and defunding the police, due to the violence policing inflicts on minority communities, expressing distrust toward the Israeli police, and criticizing the idea of reinforcing sovereignty through turning to criminal law.[[9]](#footnote-9) The main assertion of these critical perspectives is that human rights movements in general, rely on criminal law to promote Human rights.[[10]](#footnote-10) According to these arguments, by reinforcing the need for law enforcement, other support mechanisms—like community empowerment initiatives or welfare programs—suffer first.[[11]](#footnote-11) These critiques have grown substantially after the protests against police violence and systemic racism that erupted after George Floyd’s killing.[[12]](#footnote-12) This incident brought to the public’s attention many other issues,[[13]](#footnote-13), that show the inherent failures of policing when dealing with minority communities.[[14]](#footnote-14) Other critiques, in the Israeli context, have also included discussion of police militarization, viewing marginalized communities as a threat and thus justifying extreme violence against them.[[15]](#footnote-15) It cannot help but remembering the known ‘Black Lives Matter’ Sign, while looking at signs hold by Palestinian people in demonstrations. The ‘Black Lives Matter’, switched, almost naturally, to ‘Palestinian Lives Matter’. This is not surprising, given the critical race theory movement’s influence on the Palestinian cause.[[16]](#footnote-16) From these people perspective, a careful look at the effect of more policing on marginalized communities in the US serves as a cautionary tale and warning sign to Palestinian community in Israel.

This project aim to put in its center the policed life, rather than the police’s life. It aims to raise up the various voices within the Palestinian community, and the different way the police is conceived by the members of the Palestinian community in Israel. First, this project aims to trace the narratives and the way the police is conceived by members who are calling for more police intervention. Second, this project will trace the narratives and the way the police is conceived by member who are inspired by black lives matter, calling for abolition and defunding the police. Which imagination of police makes a community dividing into two camps, while sharing the same history and living and the same conditions? What is the balances that the Palestinian community members are required to deal with when choosing to which camp to belong? Are there only two camps or more? What are the values that make up their world and lead them to make the choices they make? And, is there a matter of choice when it comes to life?

This project aims to illuminate these tensions, complexities, and varied meanings of policing, law and order enforcement, from the eyes of Palestinian people. Based on ethnography, participant observation and inductive thinking, I hope to come with new insights about the way the policed Palestinian community imagine and think about the police. Why the Palestinian community in Israel calls for more police intervention, despite the historical skepticism toward it, the annoying pictures many reports show, and the ongoing raise in murders numbers?

**2. Contextual background**

Today, Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, an indigenous minority, comprise about 20% of Israeli citizens. About half live in the north of Israel, with the other half divided between the Triangle region,[[17]](#footnote-17) the Negev (النقب) and various mixed Arab-Jewish cities such as Lod, Jaffa, Haifa and Acre. Thus, the vast majority of Israel’s Arab-Palestinian citizens reside in towns or villages and in geographic regions which are exclusively Arab-Palestinian.

Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, although officially possessing full rights as citizens, have chronically suffered as a putatively hostile minority with little political representation and a weakened social, economic and educational infrastructure and have been discriminated against in all aspects and fields of Israeli life.[[18]](#footnote-18) This situation of inequality takes place in a context of ongoing historical conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people, described by some scholars as a settler colonial. For instance, in their article, Rouhana and Sabbagh-Khory, argue that understanding the evolution of the Palestinian collective political position within Israel, requires contextualization within the framework of the conflict between the Zionist movement – a settler – colonial movement with national claims – and the indigenous Palestinian national movement.[[19]](#footnote-19)

There is a history of extremely complex and violent relations between the Israel Police, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Some argue that, “Israel’s police were explicitly designed to enforce racial supremacy with violence and impunity.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Second Intifada, known as the October 2000 killings, was a defining moment in shaping the relationship between the Israeli police and Palestinians, where Israeli forces gunned down 12 Palestinians Israeli citizens’ protesters, and not a single police officer was held responsible. In her article, Suhad Bishara, argued that in order to understand why Israel “failed” to put those responsible on trial, one must look at the broader political contexts. Therefore, she argued that “Israel’s national police force is inherently tied to the state’s legal system and to the values of the regime under which it operated – that is, the goals of ethnic supremacy for Jews and oppressive control over Palestinians”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The tensions between Israeli Jews and the Arab-Palestinian, however, didn’t stop in the second Intifada. Twenty years later, May, 2021, an outbreak of violence in the same ongoing conflict.[[22]](#footnote-22) This conflict was triggered, on 6 May, when Palestinians began protest in East Jerusalem, over an anticipated decision of the Supreme Court of Israel on the eviction of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem, followed by protests, police riot control, heavy violence between Arab-Palestinians citizens of Israel and Jewish people. However, May 2021 conflict, some call it the Third Intifada, was another defining moment in raising question regarding to police violence and brutality toward the Palestinian community in Israel.

**4. Methodology**

For my PhD project, I plan to be based in three different regions in occupied Palestine, conducting 12 months of fieldwork: Umm Al Fahm, Jaffa, and Nazareth, putting the Police-Palestinian Citizen encounter at the center of my observation. Umm Al Fahm, Jaffa, and Nazareth are the central Arab-Palestinian cities in Israel, where historically, all the great riots took place. These three cities express both religious and political diversity. Geographically, the distance between these three cities in no more than one hour. Concentrating on these three sites, and talking into account the difference attitude towards the police, when it comes to a Muslim, Christian, or nationally mixed city, will help in better understanding the complexities this project aims to cover.

**SITES**

(1) **‘Umm Al Fahm’** (Arabic - ام الفحم)**:** Umm Al Fahm, the main city in the triangle, is the third largest Arab-Palestinian city in Israel, has a Muslim religious character, located near by the separation wall.[[23]](#footnote-23) In relation to other surrounding Arab-Palestinian villages, it includes many commercial centers. Politically, Umm Al Fahm was one of the focal of the Second Intifada; Violent demonstrations by city residents led to the blockade of main roads; On the first day of the events, two of the protesters were killed by police fire, and the next day another protester was killed. The fact that Umm Al Fahm is located at the center on Israel, and nearby a main street – Wadi Ara – that connects the North and the South, makes it the ideal place for having large demonstrations, which Palestinian people across the county, can easily join.

(2) **‘Jaffa’** (Arabic - يافا)**:** Jaffa is a port city, it existed as an independent city for thousands of years, until it was united with Tel-Aviv in 1949, following the Nakba (Known also as the Palestinian Catastrophe). Jaffa is one of the mixed cities in Israel, inhabited by both Arabs and Jews. Before 1948, Jaffa was the main city of culture and commerce in Palestine. Being a port city, makes it very much accessible to important cultural figures and intellectuals who came to visit, choose to stay there.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, currently, Jaffa is considered one of the main centers of violence in Palestine, with a very high percentage of lack of education and unemployment. As for 2008, there are about 46,500 residents living in Jaffa, 32,500 are Jews and 14,000 are Arabs, most of them are Muslims. Jaffa has also begun to undergo gentrification process. Among the Arab community in Jaffa, there are arguments that the Israeli government is trying to push their feet away by establishing prestigious projects that are populated mainly by Jews.

(3) **‘Nazareth’** (Arabic –الناصرة )**:** Nazareth, known as “The Arab Capital of Israel”, is the largest Arab-Palestinian city in Israel. In 2019, its population was 77,445, of whom 69% are Muslim and 30.9% are Christian. In the New Testament, Nazareth is described as the childhood home of Jesus, and as such is a center of Christian pilgrimage. Nazareth, being such an important city for Christianity, makes the relationship between the city and the Jewish state very much delicate and complex. This case is very different from the case of Jaffa and Umm Al Fahm, and may add another layer to this study.

**METHODS**

As for the method, I will conduct ethnographic research, including participant observation, witnessing the daily experience of Palestinian Citizen of Israel, and their encounter with the Police. I will also conduct personal interviews, in order to apprehend the moral dilemmas that they face. The interviews will be conducted with the families and close contacts of people who were murdered in the past years, by the Israeli police and by others. In addition, I will conduct interviews with professional actors, who were involves in such cases, as such social workers, lawyers, and feminist organizations. I will follow demonstrations happening in the regions and attend them in order to closely observe the interactions, and the Police-Arab citizen’s encounter.

**CHALLENGES**

Based on my belonging to the Palestinian community in Israel, and as a native speaker of Arabic, will be an advantage for me in entering the field. Furthermore, the historical knowledge I know about the region, will give me a context and allow me to be aware of the smallest nuances. However, this project may nonetheless face a few challenges, overcoming it, will bring a groundbreaking contribution to the study of the subject in conflict zones.

First, dealing with spheres of life, death and loss, in not an easy task. It touches on the most sensitive points of human life. It is an engagement with a personal trauma, which can lead to outbursts and evoke difficult memories.

Second, issues of violence, bloodshed, and murder, are issues that are not just personal. These are issues that evoke feelings of suspicion, towards everyone who ask about them. It will not be the first time that one Palestinian would suspect other Palestinian. This is extremely true in this study, due to the dear that they will think I’m collaborating with the police, or other state institutions. If they collaborate, they would harm themselves.

Third, being a women might be a challenge. Particularly, in a conversation with men. Discussion on power relations between men and women, have already taken place in Anthropology and other disciplines. The interview room, according to *Bourdieu*, is a microcosm of the social relations outside of it.

Nonetheless, I’m confident that Professor Yael Navaro’s expertise will mitigate these challenges, helping me assemble a comprehensive picture of the background needed for this project, and in determining how best to approach it. In doing so, this project will contribute valuable insights to the literature, adding to the body of knowledge on the subject, nourishing a scholarly curiosity in the Palestinian community, as well as in the unique position it occupies, marking the first ethnographic foray into spheres of violence, loss, pain, and fears in occupied Palestine.

**5. Bibliography**



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5. Kayan Report, Femicide: A grim reality and possibilities for resistance. 2021: https://www.kayanfeminist.org/home-page. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to Kayan: “Femicide is a distinct crime: its key motive is linked to a patriarchal social structure that perpetuates women’s inferiority and subordination to men, which subsequently legitimizes violence directed at women, including the ultimate violence: femicide”. See: Footnote 5, page 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *e.g*. Aburabia, *supra* note 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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16. Noura Erakat & Marc Lamont Hill, *Black-Palestinian Transnational Solidarity: Renewals, Returns, and Practice*,J. Palestine Stud., Aug. 2019, at 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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24. The most memorable example is Umm Kalthum, who consider a national icon in Egypt and has been dubbed “The Voice of Egypt”, given the honorific title ‘Kawkab Al-Sharq’ – The start of the East. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)