

# The Last Turkish Tarboush

By Jamil Dababat



Headdress, whether for men or women, was one of the markers of social life in Nablus, located in the northern West Bank. The city, which was built by Canaanites and ruled by various peoples, witnessed its fair share of changing headdress. The ancient city of Shkhem, constructed on the shoulder of a hill that surrounds the city from the south, sported various forms of headdress that made it especially distinct.

Nidal Al-Masri's tarboush\* tells the story of the erosion of the classic era of Nablus, when men from rich families ruled the city for centuries, and the change of headdress according to the change in historical era.

With a thick mustache and beard, and a Turkish tarboush on his head, Nidal Al-Masri smokes hookah, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the old souk in Nablus that never seems to quiet down. In a city deeply impacted by the Ottoman era, the man with marked Turkish features says, "I wear the last tarboush in the city. I represent a dead era."

The era of the tarboush as headdress for men in the Levant ended two or more centuries ago. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who modernized Turkey, officially abolished the tarboush and ordered men to wear hats under the so-called hat law of 1925. A few years later, Arabs voluntarily stopped wearing it due to changes in traditional dress after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the "taking off" of the tarboush, which symbolized the end of Islamic rule in Turkey, and the hat that symbolized the rise of the

modern state, Palestinians wore the kaffiyeh as a national symbol, which became known worldwide as a symbol of resistance.

Meanwhile, the last man, who occasionally wears the last tarboush in Nablus, believes that the beautiful era has ended. He doesn't associate it with political or ideological ideas; things to him are simpler than drastic changes to ruling systems.

The slow end to Palestinian traditional dress is a result of the changes in society during the past decades, which abolished many beliefs related to dress. Although the



Photo by Ayman Noubani.

tarboush is not historically Palestinian, the city that was ruled by the Turks for centuries still bears witness to the survival of some of Turkey's governing institutions. Nablus, which was founded by the Canaanites, still bears witness to multiple other occupations that left souvenirs of their existence.

One of the major remnants of Ottoman Turkey is the main public hospital, which is now a national hospital run by the Palestinian Authority. It was previously run by the Israeli civil administration, and before that the Jordanian government. In the hallway leading to the administrative office, multiple forms of headdress that once belonged to doctors who worked in the hospital over the years are hung in frames.



Sitting in the middle of a place built during the Turkish rule of the city, just a few meters away from the headquarters of Hamid Shaker Vdilo, a Turkish leader who was known for his cruelty and tarboush, Nidal appears happy while some photojournalists take pictures of him. "This is the last tarboush in Nablus. The tarboush for aghas and pashas."

His lips break into a wide smile when asked if he represents the Turkish

presence in the city. Nablus was known in the early decades of the last century as one of the social centers of power, along with the Palestinian coastal cities such as Acre and Jaffa. The actual remnants of the tarboush do not exist in the Palestinian cities anymore, for they almost completely faded in the face of the *hatta* (*kaffiyeh*) and *oqal*, the two traditional headdresses for men, which were worn by the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat through out his life.

Referring to his early childhood, Nidal, who is in his fifties, says that many of the men of his city used to wear a tarboush. But walking in the streets of the city now, he does not see any but on the heads of Samaritan priests who live in Upper Mount Gerizim. So Nidal's tarboush represents an ancient artifact that no longer exists. The man who spends the day being greeted by passers-by wants to represent "a bygone era" that appears only on websites that feature men who wear ancient headdresses from different eras.

Up at the top of Mount Gerizim, away from the city, Samaritan men wear the tarboush on special religious occasions, which in this case is specific to certain traditions in this very small minority. The Samaritan tarboush looks more like a kippa, worn by religious Jews. Today, headdresses reflect religious tradition. In addition, there are also Samaritan Sufis and other religious sheikhs who wear different forms of white turbans.

Nidal, who is a trader who considers himself the king of *aekob*, a spiny plant that grows in the winter, has recently created a celebrity page for himself on Facebook. "People watch me. There's a lot hanging on the tarboush." He is clearly proud of all the compliments he constantly receives.

It is not clear who precisely started the trend of the tarboush in the Arab world,

but it is widely believed that it was first worn in Morocco before it moved to the areas ruled by the Ottoman Empire.

A Wikipedia articles notes that the large Palestinian families who were scattered throughout the cities of the Palestinian coast and inland in cities such as Jerusalem and Nablus wore the tarboush as a symbol of social, religious, and political prestige. The tarboush of Haj Amin Hussein, the Palestinian leader who led the Palestinian uprising in 1948, is still in our minds.

The same article adds that the tarboush that was worn in a number of Arab countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Algeria was a necessary component of formal attire. Although no longer used, the tarboush remains a popular part of Arab heritage. This time, long gone, now only exists in pictures that chronicle periods of social status and class.

This does not even occur to Nidal, who does not see the relationship between wearing a tarboush and the weight of the current politics of Turkey, reinstated by the current prime minister, which is said to be an extension of the Ottoman rule.

In a city famous for traditional industries, and widely known as the economic center, live the tarboush-makers next to the soap and sweet makers.

Sabe'e Al-Eish, a famous trader family, was known for making *tarabeesh* in the old city, where other light industries spread near the center of the Ottoman government in Bab al-Saha, where Sultan Abdul Hamid installed his famous clock. But since the middle of the last century, the family stopped working in this industry, and their children turned to trading in antiques. But to this day they have not stopped selling *tarabeesh*. Basil Sabe'e Al-Eish, who runs one of the shops, can narrate the history of the tarboush off the top of his head!

Standing inside a shop lined with antiques imported from abroad, Basil says with pride, "We were the kings of the tarboush industry. My grandfather produced custom-made *tarabeesh*." Now the family imports *tarabeesh* from Syria. "Even in light of the current crisis that plagues Syria, we still import *tarabeesh* from there ... but now with difficulty." Exporting was affected by the war in Syria.

Standing in front of *tarabeesh* that formed a pyramid in front of his store, Basil says, "Now people wear the tarboush for an hour or two on special occasions such as weddings. Juice sellers wear it in the summer. You can spot them downtown."

According to Basil, *tarabeesh* have lost their social meaning and are now only used as props. He believes that since heads have sizes, so should the *tarabeesh*. "My grandfather tailored *tarabeesh* for every head. He would spend the night before *Eid* making *tarabeesh* for the city's men."

Nidal says he owns three *tarabeesh*: one he bought from Jordan, and two others from the city. When some of the young salesmen tell him to adjust his tarboush, he protests, saying, "The tarboush looks better like this. I like the way it looks."

He loves it when passersby call him Abu Shihab, a dramatic Syrian character who appeared in neighborhoods in Damascus during the Syrian rule, when most men wore the tarboush. From among the 500 songs by the famous Lebanese singer Nasri Shams Al-Deen, you will find an album titled *Tarboush*.

Basil says that the tarboush represents a beautiful time in a city like Nablus, and he smiles when passersby ask him to wear one of the *tarabeesh* that hang in his store.

Tarboush retailers say that patterns differ from those of the past when the tarboush was made in a single color. Now there are multicolored *tarabeesh* for children.

In Nablus, the stronghold of social and political leaders over the past century, there are those who still believe that the tarboush deserves respect and admiration, like the four men smoking hookah in the Parliament Café, one of the oldest cafés in the old town. They say that the tarboush became respectable because of the kinds of men who wore it.

In the city's metropolitan shops, which were mostly built in the Ottoman era and before, it is difficult to find a trace of the tarboush in any of the spaces it used to inhabit. They are now only sold in a couple of shops as cultural symbols, like that owned by Basil.

These days, headdress seems to carry various meanings. In the city, various headdresses signify different mindsets, beliefs, and backgrounds. You can see the religious Samaritans wearing red turbans and *tarabeesh* in their festivals; Salafies wearing white or green turbans; and farmers wearing the kaffiyeh and oqal, but no one in Nablus wears the tarboush as part of the "normal" outfit except for Nidal and licorice-juice sellers to attract customers as they run their daily errands.

The tarboush industry was strenuous for Sabe'e Al-Eish senior, especially because it required specific tailoring for each size. They are not imported from abroad.

Tarboush exports from Syria to Nablus had been stopped for many years, but Sabe'e Al-Eish resumed it ten years ago, when he noticed that kids on school trips to the city bought tens of them. While he was assembling them in stacks he noted, "Sometimes you see 50 children wearing them at once."

There are earnest attempts to revive the heritage and culture of Nablus. Over the past few years, some institutions set to revive popular traditions during Ramadan, and used the traditional storytellers, *Al-Hakawati*, to tell tales

in the city's cafés and other venues.

Just as the kaffiyeh represented struggle and revolution, the tarboush held specific political insinuations. There are those who say that the tarboush was a point of contention between the social leaders and the revolutionary leaders during the 1936 revolutions. One of the men smoking hookah at the Parliament Café said that the tarboush represented opposition to the leaders of the revolution, so a lot of people took off their *tarabeesh* as a result.

Basil said the city's population viewed the tarboush not as a political representation but as a cultural phenomenon. After the debut of Bab al-Hara, a popular Syrian series, children started to buy the *tarabeesh* imported from Syria. They wanted to imitate the men in the show. The series brought some cultural memories to light. Some kids even wanted to carry a dagger to pull off the whole look.

The series, which was incredibly popular, was set in French-mandated Syria, at a time when a lot of men wore the tarboush.

"Whoever wears the tarboush these days looks odd," concludes Basil, referring to a Samaritan priest wearing a turban.

*Jamil Dababat, a Palestinian journalist and writer, lives in Tubas in the northern West Bank, and has worked in the Palestinian News Agency (WAFA) for the past 15 years. He has covered stories in Palestine, North America, Africa, and Europe regarding Palestinian and international affairs. Dababat has won several national and international awards over the past years and is specialized in covering political, environmental, and minority and religious affairs.*

---

\* The tarboush, a tall hat in red or shades of red, is cone-shaped with black silk fringe that hangs down the side.