

# The asymmetrical equation - Land and Tourism in Palestine

**By Rami Kassis**  
**Director**  
**Alternative Tourism Group**

The Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) is a Palestinian NGO specializing in tours and pilgrimages that include critical examinations of the history, culture, and politics of the Holy Land. Established in 1995, ATG operates according to the tenets of “justice tourism”, that is, tourism that holds as its central goals the creation of economic opportunities for the local community, positive cultural exchange between guest and host through one-on-one interaction, the protection of the environment, and political/historical education. ATG works to encourage all tourism operators to abandon exploitive mass tourism and to adopt practices that positively affect the host population. Through these methods, ATG seeks to promote a positive image of Palestine and its people and to contribute to establishment of a just peace in the area.

## **Article:**

### **Background**

The case of Palestine is unique, as compared to any other situation worldwide. The Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands has affected both land and tourism alike. Palestinian land has always been the basis of the conflict, albeit the Israeli right-wing tries to paint the issue as a religious conflict. Israel seeks to obliterate the Palestinian national identity and the cultural history of Palestine through the strategy of acquiring and controlling land using illegitimate means. This is why the Occupation itself has been declared illegal under UN resolutions, human rights law and the Geneva Conventions. Israel has eyed the multiple tourism products existing in the form of history, culture and natural land, and promoted tourism to emphasize that it has occupied the land. It has tried to obliterate the previous history and culture, and on the other hand Israel has dealt equally aggressively with tourism by using it to



serve the Israeli policies of occupying Palestine, so that tourism has been promoted to stress the false notion that Israel and Palestine is one geographical entity which all belongs under the jurisdiction of Israel. Israel has altered entire maps to falsify history and, thus, created facts-on-the ground that deny

Palestinian claims that are true. These maps have obliterated important sites from the Palestinian territories and are dubiously claimed as being Israeli. Also, by the use of Israeli guides, Israel has deliberately worked to provide visitors a narrative that is untrue and makes believe that Palestinian tourism products are, in fact, Israeli. Within this narrative, the idea of Palestine is totally missing and, in their argument or story line, a historical error! To further validate these illegitimate claims, Palestinian land has been confiscated in order for Israel to build colonial settlements as a tactic to alter geopolitical and demographic realities on the ground.

### **The dilemma and impediments of land – a background**

Palestinians argue that the growth of Israeli settlements compromises their ability to establish a viable state of their own in the territories, in accordance with the proposed two-state solution. [http://www.poica.org/editor/case\\_studies/view.php?recordID=4141](http://www.poica.org/editor/case_studies/view.php?recordID=4141)

Tourism has been hijacked by Israel, not only to create a rationale for perpetuating their occupation of Palestine but also used as a tool to discount the basic rights of the Palestinian people on their own land.

### **The disparity of tourism and the land**

Tourism and land are synonymous in the Palestinian case. The Zionist project perpetuates the myth that Palestine is the promised homeland of the Jews. To validate this myth they have used the tactic of uprooting the identity of historic Palestine in order to match the Zionist account.

<http://www.councilforthenationalinterest.org/news/opinion-a-analysis/item/1659-expulsion-of-the-palestinians-the-concept-of-transfer-in-zionist-political-thought-1882-1948>Using this ploy, they have managed to nurture the support and sympathy of both the Jewish people and the international community. This is taking place by replacing the names of Palestinian cities with Jewish names and also by naming colonial settlements with biblical names. Almost every settlement is named after a Biblical city and this provides the impression that settlements are, indeed, part of Israeli territory. One can think of names such as Teqeo, Ephrata, Betar Elit, Maale Amos and Elizar as deliberate attempts to mislead the people who are deeply involved in understanding the conflict into believing that the settlements have a rationale for being where they are. Wilfully, they have destroyed hundreds of Palestinian villages, stolen the Palestinian cultural heritage and have fabricated interpretations that unlawfully convert what is a Palestinian heritage into an Israeli heritage.

Since the beginning of the 20th century Palestine has seen complicated changes in its political circumstances. These have included the creation of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 war. As a result of the latter, Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. These events have created catastrophic political, economic and social facts which have deeply affected the life of the Palestinian people, most of whom became refugees. In many ways Palestine itself was simply wiped off the map, historic Palestine coming to be known as Israel. In this context tourism became a political tool in the supremacy and domination of the Israeli establishment over land and people, and an instrument to prevent the Palestinians from enjoying the benefits and fruits of the cultural and human interaction on which tourism thrives. <http://www.atg.ps/index.php?page=context>

Despite the fact that Israel signed the Oslo Agreements with the PLO in the 1990s and recognized the establishment of the Palestinian Authority to administer some of the Palestinian territories, namely parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, many areas of life in those areas are still under total Israeli control. For example, Israel controls all access to Palestine (land and sea borders as well as access from the airport, and connecting roads), most of the Palestinian water resources, and all movement of people and goods from, to and within Palestine. These

facts have significant impacts on the development of tourism in the Palestinian territories and the dissemination of information to tourists. Jerusalem – the heart of tourism in the region – has been illegally annexed to Israel, filled with illegal settlements, besieged, judaized, surrounded by checkpoints, and encircled by the Apartheid Wall, all of which has resulted in the city's isolation from its social and geographical surroundings. Tourism also in this context can play an important role not only as an economic activity in Palestine but as a sector irrevocably linked to the conflict and has a crucial role to advocate for the Palestinian people and their rights in this land. Through its activities, tourism can assist in the creation of a new consciousness by visitors of the justice of the Palestinian cause and thereby create a wider solidarity for the Palestinians. This solidarity enables Palestine and Palestinians to be liberated from the colonial structure of domination, subjugation, and control.

### **Land acquisition- a trend in the global tourism industry**

In fact; there is a global trend of land acquisition for all forms of tourism projects around the world, and an increase of land being seen as a commodity, as real estate. Entire coastlines are being privatised when, in fact, these are lands that belong to the commons and cannot be appropriated without the total acceptance of the people via a social contract. Agricultural lands have been acquired after offering pitiful compensations and turned into helipads, golf courses, and other entertainment zones. So there is far less public space that is allowed to remain “for the common good” whether that land is in villages, countryside or inside cities. Much of the previously “common” land is accumulated through dispossession. Land conversions for large-scale tourism complexes are unreasonable and irresponsible. The lure of quick cash has led to appropriation of all kinds of lands for mega commercial ventures such as tourism, or real estate projects linked to tourism. This has resulted, for example, in significant diversion of the amount of land suitable for food production, particularly in Third World countries. Not only do “land grabs” by resort and real estate developers pose a rampant problem the world over, “sea grabs” for the development of commercial water-based tourism activities such as cruising, boating and diving, have also become commonplace, as has over-fishing by intensive methods such as factory ships. In India, for example, the Central government had sought to accord use of the seas

to large multinational corporation hotels to use as many as 26 nautical miles as part of the space they would use for the guests who arrive from the airports by seaplanes.

The rapid proliferation of mega-resorts that often include hotels, residential housing, golf courses, marinas, shopping centres, entertainment facilities and even landing strips for private jets, wreaks havoc on the natural environment, while impacting disastrously on the lives and sustainable livelihoods of millions of small-scale farmers and fisher-folk around the world.

In the particular case of Israel all the above factors exist, but they are fuelled and exacerbated by the Occupation. Israeli tourism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it fills the coffers of the tourism industry and enriches investors who put profits before ethics. Perhaps, the most serious thing about Israeli tourism is that it is a source of further deprivation and ideological control of minds about Palestine and Palestinians. The average tourist comes to Israel believing what the mainstream media has already told him or her about Palestine - either that it does not exist; or if it does, it is a dangerous place inhabited by dangerous people out to harm the good people of the world.

## **A different paradigm of tourism is possible!**

As has been pointed out above, Israeli monopoly of the tourism industry is grounded in a narrative that justifies their occupation to the land. Palestinians obviously cannot sit and watch while their lands and heritage are stolen and appropriated for the Israeli project of control, domination, and subjugation. From that contention, tourism operators must set in motion another paradigm around which tourism can:

1. Offer a Palestinian narrative that introduces the reality with regard to Palestinian history and its age-old connection to the land – Palestine through the eyes of the Palestinians, or through the eyes of historians and others in the past who recorded Palestinian culture.
2. Reclaim all the historical, archaeological and biblical sites that Israel has stripped from Palestinian ownership. Since that is a matter of the 1967 occupation and 1948 “judaization”, Palestinian tourism activists should educate tourists about the illegitimacy of Israel’s claims that those sites are theirs. It may then mean that the tourist will enter

and protest certain areas and make known his or her resentment of illegal ownership of those sites by Israel and even refuse to invest money on food and souvenirs. Tourists may also lodge their dissent by returning as advocates to lobby for more such actions by other tourists. Definitely, what is needed is a campaign, with evidence that is compelling, that exposes Israel's hollow claims. Such exposure could be the example of confiscation of Palestinian land to build a national park and its embezzlement of Palestinian heritage. Worse, Israel's claim of such heritage as theirs is a lie that must be nailed in the international arena. A case in point is the way in which the village Lubia was razed to the ground and a National Park created in its place which was called "South Africa" – a rather blatant comparison at the apartheid years in that country now practiced by Israel!

3. It is widely estimated that sixty per cent of Palestinian West Bank land is considered as Area C and therefore it is controlled and used by the Israeli side, although the Oslo Accords only granted Israel temporary custodianship of that land, until 1999. In this regard, relevant UN bodies – for example, the UN-World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO), must be lobbied to demand de-control of the many natural resources of Palestinian land and water, including touristic sites. Instead, Palestinians must be empowered to invest in and use these sites as the tourism products they offer.

## **ATG's stratagem**

It must be stated with a sense of fairness that the touristic, historic, and holy places found in Israel and the Palestinian territories are unified by geography and, perhaps, history. As such, they cannot be separated from each other. In this regard ATG encourages tourists to visit both Israel and Palestine, rather than choose to visit one over the other.

This route is the way towards more fairness and justice. Tourism in Palestine provides visitors with a particularly rewarding and enriching experience. Not only does the tourist discover the beauty, spirituality and hospitality of the country and its people, but also begins to encounter some of the political, economic, and social facts on the ground that shape the daily life of Palestinians. This is as it should be, for much

can be gained – both by tourists and by their Palestinian hosts – from a healthy relationship between the two.

Too often the contact is only very slight, consisting of rapid, coach-driven visits to the Nativity Church in Bethlehem (with a preferred souvenir shop on the way) – a style of tourism that derives from the fact that much of the itinerary is controlled both by Israel and the processes of the Israeli tourism industry. ATG promotes a Code of Conduct which seeks to contribute to a more general effort to re-engage the tourist with Palestinian land and people so that local communities benefit, over exploitation of a small number of iconic sites is reduced, and the pollution from coach-driven mass tourism in Palestinian towns and cities is also minimised.

The entire focus is therefore to bring the tourist to Palestinian cities, towns, villages, desert or other country landscapes and allow time for encounters with the population living in or near those places. Palestinians need to be mindful that visits by pilgrims and travellers to the country are an opportunity for cultural, social and human exchange. Hence tourism must transcend its mere economic characteristics, which adopt a supermarket-style relationship: 'We sell - you buy'! It is important to transcend this exclusively money-based equation by an emphasis on 'human encounters' that enable people to develop strong and lasting ties that are mutual, non-exploitative, justice-oriented and that develop a true sense of global community, and, thus allow for travellers to become messengers of justice and peace and spirituality in Palestine and Israel.