

Tourism and Human Rights in Palestine

Ben White, writer and commentator on Palestinian issues makes this stark observation: “Palestine should not have problems attracting tourists, with its rich blend of history, religious significance, local culture, as well as the varied and breathtaking scenery”.

But of course, the political context of the Israeli occupation means that the vast majority of tourists in the Holy Land only see Palestinians through the window of a tour bus, as they dash in and out of Bethlehem for a couple of hours.” White describes how “Israel’s policies and practices over the past decades and up to this moment, strongly violate human rights in every field, because of the centrality of tourism in the conflict, these rights are exposed to extensive violations, which affect the basic rights of the Palestinians.” The Human Rights Council has actually adopted more resolutions condemning Israel than it has all other states combined. Israeli actions have rendered Palestine’s existence on the world map virtually extinct. These violations have implications for tourism in Palestine.

Human rights and Israeli infringement on Palestinian tourism

Because the Palestinian situation is so definitively defined by the absence of the human rights, it makes any discourse on tourism and human rights inseparable from political circumstances being played out under the occupation.

Israel has annexed the most significant archaeological sites and tourist monuments. The encroachments of Palestinian spaces and heritage under the name of tourism often seem harmless to the naive or undiscerning tourist. The fact, however, is that these policies of Israel impinge on the right to self-determination, freedom and independence.

By the systematic control and confiscation of the tourist sites; and control of the tourism services and industry, Israel obstructs the Palestinians from the potentials and benefits of tourism resources – a clear dispossession of access to legitimate Gross National Income, per capita income.

It is important to assert the view that Palestinian culture, civilization and history represent a central dimension of national identity. A PLO Negotiation Affairs department statement says: “Despite its small size, Palestine has an abundance of historical, religious and cultural heritage sites. Every inch of this land has a story to tell, every hill the scene of a battle, and every stone a monument or a tomb. One cannot understand the geography of Palestine without knowing its history and one cannot understand its history without understanding its geography.”

Israel’s apartheid policies – repercussions for tourism in Palestine

The contrasting narratives created by the Israeli occupation are further blemished by the Israeli policies which are altering the physical contours of Palestine through the blockades, construction of the separation wall, contamination from the settlements, uprooting and burning olive trees with all its economic symbolic and cultural value.

Tragically, Israel policies have resulted in many of the positive potentials of tourism degenerating into one more of Israel's abusive policies that lead to cultural and human rights violations. ATG contends that tourism is Israel's way of inserting a political instrument to achieve supremacy and domination of the Israeli establishment over land and people and an instrument for preventing Palestinians from enjoying the benefits and the fruits of cultural and human interaction on which tourism flourish. The Israeli occupation is a good example of policies that intend to change the history of Palestine and subvert its identity. Briefly, let us look at three levels at how these Israeli policies impinge on Palestinians:

1. On the Political Level, the annexation of Israel of the land, and investment in these places affect Palestinian sovereignty over their land and natural sources in which tourism is one of its pillars.
2. On the Economic Level, Israel prevent the Palestinians from the potentials and benefits of their tourism resources by the systematic control and confiscation of the tourist sites; and control of the tourism services and industry.
3. On the Cultural and Environmental Level, cultural rights are a human rights fundamental pillar. Palestinian culture, civilization and history represent an indispensable component of national identity. The systematic obliteration, Judaization, annexation and confiscation of Palestinian tourist sites and monuments and changing their names, deeply affected the Palestinian identity and cultural rights; their cultural and geographical unity.

Political dimensions and implications

Israel imposes a policy of territorial fragmentation on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The separation of the territories has had grave consequences on the fabric of society.

The Palestinian tourism industry has been faced with many barriers that hinder its development. Since the Israeli occupation of 1967, the Israeli tourism industry has flourished in Palestine, mostly through the exploitation of Palestinian sites. The Palestinian sector has been faced with unfair competition and an oppressive military occupation. More than simply marginalizing the Palestinian tourist industry, Israeli colonization policies, including the illegal wall and settlement regime, have all but completely severed the Holy and historic cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem from one another.

The case of Bethlehem as a World Heritage Destination

It has been observed that the collective value of Bethlehem to civilization is indisputable. Christmas, one of the most widely-celebrated religious festivals in the world, is based on the birth story of Jesus, which took place here more than 2000 years ago. In 2002, following the Israeli invasion of the cities of Nablus, Bethlehem and Hebron, and the deliberate destruction of cultural sites, the World Heritage Committee adopted a resolution to support the protection of the exceptional universal value of Palestinian cultural and natural heritage. After nearly 10 years, in November 2011, Palestine joined UNESCO as a full Member State. In July 2012, the World Heritage Committee, during its 36th Session held in Saint Petersburg, inscribed the Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the

Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route, Bethlehem, Palestine on UNESCO's World Heritage in Danger List.

As an observer state in the UN, Palestine will now be a responsible actor on the international stage, using diplomatic and legal tools now available, in order to protect the whole of Palestine, and the little town which witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ., Yet, Palestine continues to face enormous challenges and obstacles in offering the truth about Bethlehem and its people as a result of the ongoing Israeli occupation. These include:

- **Restriction of movement:** Palestinian tours guides or transportation companies have not been able to enter Israel since 2000. From over 240 tourist guides licensed to work all over Palestine and Israel, only 42 have permits to guide in Israel, which are renewed periodically and without guarantee. These restrictions on movement severely hinder the development of a domestic tourism industry.
- **Limited control over tourism resources:** Another key obstacle to developing our tourism industry is the Palestinian inability to carry out any development work in approximately 60 percent of the West Bank where many historical, religious and archaeological treasures are located.
- **Sizeable Leakages of Tourism revenues:** While Bethlehem continues to receive millions of visitors, the majority of these tourists only spend half a day there, leaving very little time spent among the host communities in Bethlehem. This phenomenon has much to do with Israeli tour operators, who control the industry and are able to tailor tours to benefit Israel and promote hotels in West Jerusalem or in illegal settlements which surround Bethlehem.

The challenge ahead

Tourism is more than a mere industry for Palestine. It opens the space for contact between Palestinians and international visitors. It allows for Palestinians to assert their identity, safeguard their culture and, above all, enlist advocates who will go out and speak for their human rights and dignity.

In the aftermath of the first Palestinian intifada ATG realized the positive potential for an infrastructure in Palestine to receive visiting foreigners looking to understand the local reality. As a result, ATG has modelled a very successful pattern of mobilizing travellers as justice tourists who come to see the reality, carry away a message, and design forms of solidarity through which they advocate for justice with peace in Palestine.

Tourism must, in the end, be an instrument in challenging the stereotypes that Israel has constructed over the Palestinian. It can transform the negative image of Palestine internationally and grow local dignity and fortitude.

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