



The global image of Palestine through international tourism

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Introduction

Tourism has always been a major economic sector in the Palestinian economy. Despite the fact that the sector is in decline (-16.3% of rooms occupancy since 2010¹, the continuing importance of tourism is being underlined because of the lack of work opportunities in other labor sectors.

It is well known that the bulk of mainstream tourists into Palestine are Christian pilgrimages. They account for nearly 60 % of tourists². The biblical history of the land and the physical presence of Jesus more than 2000 years ago, motivate pilgrims to walk on the paths of Jesus and other prophets in order to deepen their faith and to relive Biblical events. Recently, however, yet another tourism sector has emerged. Alternative tourism has emerged as a response and counter to the complexity of the political situation and the difficulty of understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the outside. In addition to the desire to visit Palestine, and in order to get an independent view of the situation, rather than the somewhat biased view of the mainstream media, alternative tourism has surfaced both as an avenue of activism for those who are previously sensitized, and for those who see it as a way to develop a political opinion about the conflict based on a first-hand encounter. Indeed, through alternative tourism world activists can show their solidarity to the Palestinian cause and get to know it better.

Comparing Bethlehem to Lourdes in France we can persuasively affirm the lack of religiosity ambiance in sacred places and cities of Palestine. The expectations of tourists do not always match reality, and their view

¹ Passia 2012, Pg 368

² Rami Kassis Director of Alternative tourism group

changes with apprehensive voyages to Palestine. So, is the external image of this country a realistic approximation of reality? Or, could it be that prejudices are overwhelming the global view about this country?

This research aims to study the image of Palestine as perceived by international tourists and matching it to reality. But it also seeks to probe why image and reality undergo a shift. People wanting to visit Palestine, are usually informed by travel agencies that theirs is a visit to Israel. It is very rare to locate a tourism bureau that specifically promotes a tour to Palestine.



Politically speaking, Palestine in common understanding and parlance, refers to the West bank and Gaza strip. Sadly maps, guide books, tourism agents, and advertisements hardly ever point to the real geographical reality. If at all they do, they then use the names of the Palestinian territories' name³. Generally governments formally advise their citizens not to enter the Gaza strip. They also recommend them to exercise permanent caution in the west bank" as in the case of the French official governmental site of traveling advices⁴. This is also the case

when passing checkpoints that surround zones (A) which are inhabited and controlled by Palestinians.

³ Israël et les territoires Palestiniens: Lonely planet edition, written by Michael Kohn, Miriam Raphael, Amelia Thomas, Roxane Assaf, Matt Beynon Rees, Alon Tal

⁴ <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/conseils-aux-voyageurs/conseils-par-pays/israel-territoires-palestiniens-12265/>

At the entrance there are big red signs, on display by the Israeli army, which warn foreigners of the danger of death that threatens them by approaching a closed military zone. For those who are ignorant about the political situation in the country, they are easily turned away by such advisory as well as the frequent political speeches that often highlight the risks of being attacked by terrorist groups in Palestine.

As a matter of fact Palestine has got a very small share in the world tourism market. It has, commonly speaking, also acquired a relatively poor standing. Analyzing several guide books, it is evident that tourism in Israel is put as a priority for visitors. For example a French guidebook called “Israel and the Palestinian territories”, includes 8 chapters describing touristic zones in details. Only a single chapter brings up the west-bank in 29 pages out of 428. This despite the fact that the West Bank forms 21% of the Israeli and Palestinian territories together, and the Gaza strip is not even mentioned! Moreover the book gives some glances about the history of both countries. On pages 34-35 the book talks about the moments which preceded the events of 1948 when Palestinians were exiled from their towns, and mentions the Arab revolts of 1929 as ‘pogroms’ of the immigrant Jewish people. But later on the book skips completely the fact that the Israelis had already an army that was originally having clashes with the Palestinian revolt guerillas of 1936 and acting through terrorist attacks on the British army including setting off a bomb in King David’s hotel in July of 1946. As for the Nakba of 1948 the book explains several theories about the events, but at all time it refuses to admit that an ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population happened: “If the attacks of Jews (or the attacks they inspired) was the main cause of the fall and exile of Palestinians in 1948, the lack of vitality in their

society, contrasting with the youth and dynamism of Zionists explains a lot of things. If the urban people were enthusiastic nationalists, rural populations, widely illiterate, knew few things about the political situation and its evolution: few tried to engage in organized struggle, they tended to be scared and to run in front of troubled changes”. Even if this guide book claims to be as authentic and objective as possible, it does not hesitate in several places to justify Israel’s positions through history “These new actors... launched a vast wave of suicide attacks. Israel hardened its position towards Palestinians by electing Ariel Sharon, a previous general who used to qualify the Intifada in private as a “threat of existence” for Israel. Sharon sent tanks to occupy all the cities of the West Bank that had been returned to Arafat, and ordered frequent and murderous incursions in Gaza” (pg 40). In addition to the vocabulary that incriminates and judges the opponents of Israel “Yasser Arafat launched a long terrorist campaign...” (pg36), “the Iraqi invasion troops”

As for the Churches view, which is a big influence on the majority of tourists who are here for religious purposes, they prefer to commonly refer to it as the ‘Holy Land’. Regarding the political conflict they desist from offering a clear opinion or simply not increasing their knowledge about the situation. For example a catholic travel advice web-site refers to the West Bank as Israel⁵. It may not be an intentional mistake, coming, as it does, from an official Catholic spokesperson. But similar errors show the presence of Palestine in a poor light in the international tourism and emphasize it. Besides the foreign Christian movements or associations in Palestine care a lot about the ‘Christians of the Holy Land’. Even though it might not be their intention they damage the image of the Palestinian

⁵ <http://www.thecatholictravelguide.com/Israel.html>

society by highlighting the suffering of Palestinian Christians. Even though some theologians are inclined to defend Israel's biblical right to exist, through it, they deviate their public, whom are potential pilgrims of Palestine, away from the real picture. This is the case of the knights of the holy tomb, an order that goes back to the end of the crusades mandate in 1291 as it is written in the orders official website⁶. It contributes with the 90% of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem needs. They believe that "On this land torn by 60 years of war, we must first maintain the Christians." By helping Christians alone and treating them as a neutral part of the conflict without having a clear position on Israelis aggressions on Palestinian Christians, they contribute to obfuscating the reality of the conflict and pull the Palestinian Christians from their original environment. To claim that Christians are oppressed without mentioning their oppressor opens up the opportunity for Israelis to escape their responsibilities of occupation forces and permits to people jumping to wrong conclusions especially that that the real oppressor of the Palestinian Christian is the Palestinian Muslim! For example in a Christian right wing French magazine, there is an article that narrates the suffering of Christians of the holy land. The article affirms that those Christians are Palestinians, and interviews a Christian woman assuring that the only oppressor of Palestinian Christians is Israel. But the article questions in its conclusion, the durability of good relations between the adherents of both religions⁷. Furthermore, other Christian movements which are less objective do not even question their unlimited support for the state of Israel. These movements do not have the same previous reasons, which are mainly political, for supporting Israel. But they simply sustain it, for biblical ones. This completely non-rationally support cannot

⁶ <http://ordredusaintsepulcre.org/Presentation-de-l-Ordre.html>

⁷ <http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-monde/2007-01-25/les-chretiens-oublies/924/0/90216>

be discussed or changed. Take, for instance, the case of a private website that belongs to a Christian Zionist group based in Geneva called 'Christian Action for Israel'. The website states and explains to its believers the reasons that give the right to Israel to own the Land, and banning Palestinians from it; "Many in Israel are asking that the 'Palestinians' leave peacefully. There are plenty of places for them to go. Whatever they do, it is not Israel's responsibility to provide a place for them to live. Israel's command from God is to remove the enemy from their midst and dwell in the land"⁸. In another Christian pro-Israeli website a journalist called Giulio Meotti publishes an article which describes the future "Palestinian state". He surely doesn't show any positive attitude towards it "It will be a racist state... It will be a state led by Holocaust enablers... A state that will banish freedom... A state that will drive away Christians from the land... A state that will stone to death Arab prostitutes... A state where terror militias will cut fingers off smokers... A state that will ban drinking... A state where ambulances will be stopped on the way to hospitals and wounded will be shot in cold blood... A state where young couples will not walk hand in hand in the Al Manara Square of Ramallah..."⁹ Surely this image composed by invented statements and common prejudices not only discourages tourists to visit Palestine, but strongly doubts the right of Palestinians to have a state: "Who would live in such a state? So why is the world dribbling at the mouth about the creation of a "State of Palestine"?" Moetti works in a magazine called Il Foglio, and used to work in the Wall Street Journal. He also wrote a book called A New Shoah: The Untold story of Israel's victims of terrorism. These kinds of articles and books might not be numerous but they are enough to create an image of

⁸ <http://christianactionforisrael.org/right.html>

⁹ <http://www.agsconsulting.com/articles/dm110921.htm>

Palestine as a place where psycho-terrorists live and rule. Many are the articles which confuse personal beliefs with political opinions, and make every effort at negative propaganda, and make it sound credible enough to keep tourists out of the Palestinian territories.

For tourists who are visiting Palestine, their first impression will be made depending on their first contact with the land, people, culture, and society. This first contact can be analyzed depending on the way they have been briefed and oriented before they arrive in Palestine. Israeli tourist agencies are one of the main promoters of tourism that brings pilgrims and tourists into Palestine. It is they who create the opinion about Palestinians and their country. Israeli agencies offering tours in Palestine can mainly be two: Alternative tourism agencies or Christian pilgrimage tours. Alternative tourism in Israel is very developed. There are eco-tourism services, as well as adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and political tourism. The large part of alternative tourism in Israel promotes activities in the Israeli territories. But part of those activities carried out in Israel by alternative associations, are consecrated to talk about the conflict in a way. Take for instance the non-profit association of Zechrot; a movement carried out by both Israelis and Arabs living in Israel which aims to revive and keep the memory of the Nakba “Destruction, expulsion, looting, massacres and incidents of rape of the Palestinian inhabitants of this country (Israel).” alive, as mentioned on their website¹⁰. This association believes that “there is an attempt to erase this memory from the collective consciousness and from the landscape”. And so its vocation is to introduce the Palestinian Nakba to the Israeli-Jewish public, through tours to the demolished and erased Palestinian

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<http://www.zochrot.org/en/menu/%D7%96%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA/%D7%9E%D7%99-%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%97%D7%A0%D7%95>

villages and towns. This kind of local tourism not only helps out in finding a solution to the conflict by bringing both Palestinian and Israeli peoples to cogitate about its roots and motives. But also adds a missing fragment to the worlds' collective memory via incoming tourists. Besides East Jerusalem, all developed activities by Israeli alternative tourism agencies in the West-Bank are in partnership with other Palestinian alternative tourism associations. Being alternative tourism, these Israeli agencies work only as intermediates to deliver tourists to their Palestinian partners. Since the first contact given by these agencies is identical to the services provided by Palestinian alternative tourism groups, it could be analyzed later on, along with the Palestinian alternative services. However the exception to the rule, which is occupied East Jerusalem, must be studied apart. Being on the west side of the wall, East Jerusalem is officially an occupied Palestinian territory. Illegally annexed by Israel in 1968, it follows the Israeli government. Before getting evolved in alternative tourism actions in the Holy city, one must understand the context which has created it. Right beside the Al-Aqsa square there's a Palestinian inhabited neighborhood called Silwan. This area forms the Holy Basin which stands for the location of the presumed Jewish temple. For the last few years massive campaigns of excavations had been carried out in the zone demolishing hundreds of houses and expelling people out of the city. Israeli classic tourism agencies, specially an organization called City of David offer people a "biblical" tour through excavated tunnels and discovered ruins in the zone, veiling the demolished houses and unsatisfied Arabs being expelled¹¹. An Israeli alternative tour organized by the Peace Now (Shalom Akhshave) shows tourists the other side of the equation where "Elad foundation, which gives money to the city of David and the archaeological digs. (...) is linked to the settler

¹¹ <http://www.cityof david.org.il/en/tours/city-david/city-david-tours-biblical-jerusalem>

movement and encourages religious Jews to move into Silwan.” Explains a French reportage¹². “These tours are made in the purpose of finding a fair two state solution, and accomplishing peace between both countries”. As for the association, Silwan is an example of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Concerning visits in Palestine provided by Israeli agencies that promote pilgrimage services, the visit of Palestine does not differ between agencies specialized in Christian pilgrimage or those providing this pilgrimage service as one of others. The real contact with the Palestinian culture is restricted to a quick tour (about two hours) in the nativity church of Bethlehem¹³. But rare are the agencies which sleepover in the city. Basically these agencies focus on historical and biblical places; putting aside all living Christian culture or life in tours to the Holy-Land, and especially in the West Bank and Gaza strip. These atrocious politics are denounced by Rami Kassis in a publication called Pilgrimages For Transformation. For instance an Israeli agency called Israel Christian Tour promotes Christian tours in the holy land¹⁴. Going through its program of eight days there is not one meeting allowing tourists to have a contact with native Christians who are for the most part Palestinians. As a matter of fact, tourists enter the Palestinian territories once and for few hours out of eight days of Christian pilgrimage. Another representative case might be an Israeli touristic advertisement web-site that lists a number of activities and shows in Israel. But it also offers essential information about the country. In a page dedicated to talk about Christian communities in Israel they refer to Palestinians as populations

¹² <http://www.france24.com/en/20080828-political-tourism-jerusalem-israel-palestinian-territories-silwan-city-of-david>

¹³ Pilgrimages for transformation, Edited by Ranjan Slomon: The Palestinian and Justice Tourism: another tourism is possible Page 34.b

¹⁴ <http://www.israelchristiantours.com/8-Days-Israel-Christian-Tour.html>

living in the western bank of the Jordan River¹⁵. Moreover it refers to Christian communities living in the zone as “Arab speakers”. Clearly the page manages to speak about Christians of the Holy land without letting tourists or pilgrims even guess that those Christians are also Palestinians by nationality.

Itineraries made up by autonomous travelers can be very various and divergent. And so are the use and the knowledge acquired during the travels. In fact solo travelers’ visits to Palestine can’t be studied in the same range. They could be categorized depending on the visited places and time spent on a visit. Generally travelers like to be guided by a traveling book. As cited above, guiding books may be confusing and misleading, especially that there’s only one such published by a Palestinian tourism NGO¹⁶. Therefore travelers that are courageous enough not to be misled false propaganda, and dare entering the Palestinian territories, will soon find that facts and conspiracy-theories can be very different. For example the separation wall built by Israel is mentioned in the Israeli ministry of defense web site as a “security fence”¹⁷. Even in other sources that may be qualified as more touristic like the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise's Jewish Virtual Library explains that this “security fence” was built on the “pre-1967 “Green Line” between Israel and the West Bank to prevent Palestinian terrorists from infiltrating into Israeli population centers.”¹⁸ But once in the Palestinian territories, tourists will easily conclude that this so-called ‘security fence’ is not a fence but a wall. They will also discover that its

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http://www.otisrael.com/Tourism_Fra/Articles/Christian%20Themes/Pages/Les%20Communautes%20Chretiennes%20en%20Israel.aspx

¹⁶ Palestine & Palestinians- A.T.G Alternative Tourism Group

¹⁷ www.securityfence.mod.gov.il

¹⁸ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/fence.html>

purpose is not to defend the Israeli populations but to exclude and divide Palestinian people and villages from each other and their work spaces. They will also find they disagree with the numerous maps that show this wall on the 67 frontiers. Reality will make it clear that the wall, which is supposed to be built on a length of 709 Km while the “Green Line” is half that length (320 Km), is built over the Palestinian territories in the west-bank and not between it and Israeli territories. Furthermore the “fence” is an 8 m high concrete wall and has got an Israeli sniper-guarding tower every 100 meters. But the “fence” is not just one but they are various such fences ‘snaking’ around and encircling every Palestinian village in Zone A territory. This “preventive fence” barely leaves 54% of the Palestinian territories (Zone A) in the West-Bank out of the wall in several non communicating areas and takes away 49291 dunums of land (approx 4930 Hectares)¹⁹. That is one of hundreds of details that can be shocking or un-expected for first-timers unaccompanied tourists in Palestine. Despite the differences amid voyagers, they all experience misconception and confusions on the political level as well as on the social level. Take for pattern a testimony in a solo travel network the subtitles used by the traveler, Hannah Slavik, such as “Palestinian Hospitality”, “Common Misconception”, ”safe”, ”safety and cultural tips”... reveal common ideas or impressions of visitors of Palestine²⁰. Of course, once again, in any autonomous visit the level of sensibility that explorers may acquire depends on several facts and mostly on their curiosity and about their understanding of geo-political events. Therefore the course and the touristic satisfaction of this contact can vary amongst voyagers.

¹⁹ http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/MAPS/newpdf/WestBankWall.jpg

²⁰ <http://www.cstn.org/reports/mideast/mideastsolo02.html>

In a third array of tourism flows in Palestine, the one that ought to be mentioned is about people brought to the country by its own people's advertisements. Those who already have a different point of view about Palestinians have, for the most, a Palestinian contact that has attracted them to come and see by themselves the reality of the situation. This contact or intermediate might be professional, meaning alter touristic agencies. For alternative agencies as for classic tourism agencies, both are dedicated to give people the closest picture to reality. Taking into account classic tourism and analyzing the different Palestinian tour operators they mainly work on outgoing tourism, and are more like travel agencies which don't represent any interest in this research. As for those presenting local touring services, they all include responsible and alternative tourism in their offers. For the rest of proposed itineraries the services of pilgrimage or classic touring always includes encounters with locals and lectures or discussions concerning the political conflict. That is the case of two different offices; one which is a company located in Nablus called ArabXperts Events & Travels²¹, and the other which promotes a touristic website that offers diverse programs by several Palestinian touristic agencies called Visit-Palestine²². The common point in both sites is that all proposed circuits must include awaking political activities. Evidently, the political involvement in this land is not optional or additional, but it's a part of the context, culture and society. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict marks the modern history of the last 64 years of this land, and visiting the Holy land without at least having an introduction to the main concepts of the conflict cannot be possible, unless it's intentionally and methodically made ambiguous in the eyes of tourists. Obviously Jerusalem, due to its particularly political situation,

²¹ <http://arabxperts.ps/ar/?page=one&cat=11>

²² <http://www.visitpalestine.ps/index.php?lang=en&page=122614879213>

and being a “seam zone”, makes the exception of all rules. For Palestinian touristic agencies in Jerusalem they are a very unique case, since they are politically Palestinian lands, but actually in a territory controlled by civil Israeli municipality, not by military authorities like the rest of occupied Palestinian territories in the West-Bank. Furthermore Jerusalem is a highly religious touristic city, and touristic agencies there, in large part, work on pilgrimage tours. These agencies could be classified in two groups. The first includes agencies that decided to compete with the Israeli pilgrimage services. They offer the exact same itineraries of their competitors, leaving on the margin the Palestinian territories, and Arab population, un-contributing in giving or changing the image of Palestine through their touristic activities. But the second type of agencies, are the ones who decided to use their privileged situation, regarding other tourism agencies in the West-Bank, and through pilgrimage of biblical places in the West-Bank such as Jifna, Taybeh, Zababdeh, Hebron, Nablus or others. These visits are increasingly important for the reflected image of Palestine through the world. By these pilgrimages and through the testimonies of Christians of this land, tourists get a true and human encounter with partners in faith. And finally these pilgrimages make of the Christian voice in the Holy-Land a true spokesperson in behalf of the Palestinian people to the world. As for alternative tourism, a very important sector in Palestine as well as a growing one is essentially political due to the context that justifies it. But there are, as well, ecological tourism packages working in an unofficial way that will be studied later on.

Palestine has been a land of pilgrimage for centuries, but its actual situation has decreased the visits of pilgrims. This has given rise to a new kind of tourism - political tourism. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one

of the most known and debated issues in the world. Thus huge media campaigns get common public to accumulate big doubts, and into an un-comprehensible, ultra-complicated conflict. And so it has become a must for people interested in getting the complete image, to come and see in order to build ones personal opinion. Even though the political context is the engine that created alternative tourism in Palestine, NGO alternative tourism agencies refuse to recognize themselves as a political tourism agenda, because they see in their work a larger mission to accomplish, which escapes political activities only.

Before getting to Palestinian alternative agencies, let us recall that the Israeli political alternative tourism that operates in Palestine; plan their tours through Palestinian alternative agencies. That is the case of Green Olive tours, an Israeli alternative tourism agency that believes in the right of return and the one state solution, that has got a Palestinian partner which operates its activities in the Palestinian territories²³. All alternative tourism agencies in Palestine are NGOs, and their work is not limited to tours. They, instead, make a reliable long term paving to the alternative agenda in tourism. All these NGOs make part of the N.E.P.T.O (Network Experiential Palestinian Tourism Organization). “NEPTO is an initiative to regroup the alternative tourism agencies which are a minority in the Palestinian tourism, in order to give them a stronger voice and helping the young alternative agencies to find their place in the market” Says Rami Kassis the Executive Director of the Alternative Tourism Group, ATG, the first alternative tourism NGO in Palestine, represents this work by its numerous publications and activities. The group does not only seek to work in a new branch of tourism but it also has the vision and ideal to contribute in constructing the basics of this agenda of tourism. It seeks in

²³ <http://www.toursinenglish.com/2007/11/about-alternative-tours.html>

finding alternative and more responsible ways in touring the country. For instance they have contributed in publishing a code of conduct for a more responsible tourism in Palestine and other deep reflections about the responsibility of pilgrims via the Palestinian conflict. As well, they have given an international opinion representing the Christians of the Holy-Land in the world-wide Christian-community discourse. The latest global gathering was in the international meeting of Bonn in order to discuss a strategy to get a “wider audience (of pilgrims) with a more insistent and pro-active marketing strategy.” as declared by the statement of the meeting²⁴. Concerning their opinion regarding the engagement of Christians as pilgrims in the conflicts of the Holy-Land they have launched a call in a book titled “Come & See”- Come & See A Call from Palestinian Christians. It explains that indifference to problems happening in the Holy-Land is not being a responsible Christian. Jesus Christ taught us to stand and speak against injustice “we call on you to say a word of truth and to take a position of truth with regard to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land”²⁵. The call that alternative pilgrimage makes is to invite the Christians of the world to get interested in the conflict, see facts with their own eyes and finally act about it. This call that had mainly been launched in a script written by Palestinian Christians representing churches and related-churches organizations called Kairos Palestine²⁶ reflects an opinion that had contributed in an effective but problematic way within the churches. By its ‘a la carte’ served programs, ATG allows people to have a wider and more objective image about the situation. Letting tourists choose their itinerary and diversifying its services to types, ATG gives people the

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<http://www.atg.ps/index.php?page=International%20meeting%20in%20Bonn%20on%20tourism%20in%20Palestine>

²⁵ Come & See, Page 5

²⁶ www.kairospalestine.ps

chance to see what they want, perform the kind of activities they like, but above all motivates visitors to get informed about the country before arrival. Itineraries and thematic ideas proposed by the ATG restart the professional alternative tourism activities in Palestine. For example political tours are provided depending on the tourist and his knowledge about the actualities. As a matter of fact you can have an introductory basic tour to comprehend the conflict, but you can also tour through Palestinian daily life in order to recognize their sufferings and see how they struggle. But once a person has known and seen all about that, one can still have a more optimistic tour in finding a peace solution and meeting those who work for it. Such tours show the visitor that Palestinians, despite 64 years of tragedies, still see hope and enough reasons to work for a better future. Clearly Alternative work may be realistic but above all it highlights the optimism in cruel reality. As for religious tours, Alternative tourism had deepened its thoughts about the proper or the most responsible way of having a living religious experience in this three-time Holy-Land. Palestine having so many sacred places inspires deep emotions in hearts of any believer. But in order to develop those emotions so that they become a living and a true religious encounter, people must live the past of holy places as well as their present. That's how the pilgrims must be aware of the context of the Holy-Land. The native Christians living in a land which they believe to be sacred believe they have the responsibility of sharing the treasures of their land with their brothers and sisters in faith. All along with the daily Christian life they carry out among holy places, " Your trip will incorporate the essential pilgrimage sites – such as the site where Jesus was born and where he died – along with the back-drop of the current

suffering of Palestinians in the Holy Land.” states the ATG religious pilgrimage tour advertisement²⁷.

As previously mentioned in the first part, world-wide pilgrimage propaganda might misinterpret the concept of the political conflict into a religious one. Alternative pilgrimages in Palestine intend to underscore the kind of conflict in the land by explaining its roots in order to avoid working for proselytism pilgrimages in Palestine: “As Christians living side-by-side with our Muslim brothers and sisters, we know that the threat to peace is neither Islam nor Judaism, but rather Israel's military occupation.” declares the ATG promoting for its pilgrimage tours on its web site²⁸. Pertaining to Historical and Cultural tour programs, they are the most close to classic tourism activities. The differences are essentially in the used facilities, for example tourists have the choice of sleeping in a host family instead of a hotel. Walks, for instance, are made in the center of the city in order to allow tourists to have a real and true contact with locals and giving, those the chance to profit from the touristic market instead of leaving it monopolized in the hands of a controlling minority. A unique quality in alternative tourism in Palestine is that they have managed to blend political, religious and cultural interests, in one itinerary. This fusion gave birth to various tours such as the Nativity Trail, which allows all kinds of tourists to walk together. In ATG's website this activity is classified as religious. But when asking Rami Kassis, he preferred to call it an “alternative-tour”. The nativity trail is above all a cultural tour which permits tourists to encounter the locals and to visit the historical places in Palestine all at once. Without forgetting that Pilgrims have the chance to enjoy a faithful path, full of amazing

²⁷ <http://www.atg.ps/index.php?page=pilgrimages>

²⁸ <http://www.atg.ps/index.php?page=pilgrimages>

views and different micro-climates, this kind of tour is offered by most of alternative agencies in Palestine, under different names. Since the alternative tourism supports the alternative economy, it does not use the classic tourism facilities. Therefore it works through local markets, and mainly depends on cultural centers, churches, or associations. These secondary services have developed a tourism activity of their own depending on their friendly networks. Take for example the EEC Environmental Educational Center which has as its main goal “the protection of local ecology and the preservation of Palestinian nature”²⁹. It has got as its main criteria a reliance on tourism. This non-professional tourism mediator is particular since it is the only one that works mainly in eco-tourism. As for churches they have got a special potential since they work directly with other parishes worldwide, and legally they are not tour agents. They may also develop a tourism movement of their own through their associations. Take for instance the Sabeel center. Sabeel is an “ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians.” as they categorize themselves³⁰. Their main objective is to find points of understanding in order to contribute in the peace process. But they have devoted a part of their activities in trips for making people realize the life of Christians, and Palestinians in general, under occupation. The Sabeel center is located in Jerusalem and their trips are also a sort of informal alternative tourism³¹. Eventually a last way of attracting tourists may be the friendships that allow people all over the world to have an attractive idea about the country and may come to visit their local friends during vacations or their free time. These different means all lead tourists to this land in order to encounter its people. But each of them has got a different perspective or previous ideas about the

²⁹ http://www.eecp.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=9

³⁰ <http://www.sabeel.org/ourstory.php>

³¹ <http://www.sabeel.org/groupvisits.php>

land, people, culture, or society. Once here their prejudices will influence their view on the country and the way they are introduced to the society, depending on their “guide”, who will also influence their points of view by what they are taken to see and who they meet.

Once first contact is established and having experienced a journey, one may talk about impressions. The image of Palestine through tourists is mainly made by these impressions. Firstly tourists who’ve toured the country guided by Israeli pilgrimage guides, having spent only a couple of hours in the Palestinian territories and having heard a lot about Jewish history in the land, such as Yad Vachem, a museum which talks about the second World War II holocaust which was carried out in Germany but inexplicably the museum was held in Jerusalem, probably will not know that they have been in Palestine (57% of pilgrims who visit the nativity church believe that Bethlehem is an Israeli city)³². Those Israeli tour-sponsored visits make the largest part of tourism in the Holy-Land, taking 97% of its revenue³³. But there’s a more dangerous consequence to Israeli tourism. Because once tourists are back in their country they will make a relation between what they’ve seen, or more exactly what they haven’t seen. Israel, having 4600 Israeli guides against only 180 Palestinian guides from whom only 46 of them are permitted to work in the Israeli territories, gives an image that does not include the occupation or violations of international humanitarian law by its army in describing an ethnic cleansing wall as a fence³⁴. So when tourists confront the debate of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back in their homes they will give their testimony that will be more of an Israeli version of the situation. Israeli programs of pilgrimages can be then judged depending on their

³² ATG statistic report

³³ Life Under Occupation: An introduction to the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories
September 2011 PG20

³⁴ Pilgrimages for Transformation: 21-24 Oct 2005 Pg 34

consequences, as a heavily stigmatized political speech which works in a genius way by not talking about politics.

As for unaccompanied travelers their opinion varies a lot and it will not be fair to make a general opinion of the image that they get and transmit about Palestine. But there is evidently an important variable which plays an important role in building the image of Palestinian society and civilization amongst alone travelers, that is the guide book. Guide books do importantly influence tourists. There might be some codes or traditions that could be misunderstood by tourists and power their points of view on the society and therefore get them uncomfortable. But if on the contrary the guide books explain these codes, it facilitates understanding between locals and tourists. For example common transports in Palestine are for the most part vans. In order to pay the driver, people pass the money from back seats through passengers. When people want to grab ones attention to pass the money it is commonly accepted in the Palestinian society to poke the other. Some guide books make the effort of explaining those tiny but useful details: “When someone pokes you on the shoulder aboard, he simply wants to tell you to pass his money to the driver”³⁵. It is possible that solo travelers are the most probable to get an objective opinion about the country. Still they could get a wrong image, or at least far removed from reality because of various variables, such as the time spent in visits (Palestinian guides recommend to spend at least a night in each city³⁶), places seen, prejudices or mistaken information, their education, external influence like guide books or wrong propaganda, or simply misunderstanding the events.

³⁵ Israël et les territoires Palestiniens: Lonely planet edition, written by Michael Kohn, Miriam Raphael, Amelia Thomas, Roxane Assaf, Matt Beynon Rees, Alon Tal ,Pg 274

³⁶ ATG, JAI. 2011: Life under occupation (Page 21)

As for Palestinian toured groups they also vary depending on their itineraries and the objective of the tourism agencies. In any case a tourist will be well introduced to the conflict choosing any Palestinian guide to tour him since, as previously mentioned, the problem is a part of the landscape. And in order to avoid it, one must deliberately close his eyes. Since January 2011, till June 2011, there were about 263,771 tourists visiting Palestine per year and about 34.5% of them are from the EU³⁷. On the other hand Israel receives 3,362,241 tourists per year³⁸, that is 12 times more, and benefits from the 97% of income of the whole tourist movement in the holy land³⁹. But the level of awareness about the circumstantial situation of the country varies between different services. For tourists who are interested in having a complete picture about the country. It would benefit them more to use a tourism agency which provides a methodically planned tour and helps acquiring a clearer image. But there's a major difference between fixed and interactive itineraries agencies. In the first case, pilgrims ignore their destination or their location on the map. In the second, tourists participate actively in choosing the places to see and learning about them, through maps and documents before their actual presence. This is the case of ATG who includes in its policy to fix a flexible schedule depending on the kind of tourists, their actual knowledge and their interests.

Despite difficulties and lack of transparency in international advertisements, tourism in Palestine is very important economically, interesting for pilgrims as well for those who desire to understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But it is most crucial for recreating an image

³⁷ Passia 2012 (Page368)

³⁸

<http://www.tourism.gov.il/GOVheb/Ministry%20of%20Tourism/Statistics/Documents/visitor%20arrivals-2011.xlsx>

³⁹ ATG, JAI. 2011: Life under occupation (Page 20)

of the country in the world and printing the steps of the nation through history during the long conflict and the Palestinian cause which had become a part of its identity in the collective memory worldwide.