Tourism and Heritage in Palestine;
A Conflict between Two Narratives

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Political dimensions and motives occupy a great space in their relation and interaction with various heritage fields and numerous human experiences. For every society, heritage constitutes a fundamental factor in plumbing historical and cultural depths. It expresses identity and interacts with the social, political, and environmental reality. It also confronts the questions and challenges that a society encounters in the course of its development, where identities, nationalities, ethnicities, and particularities are formed. Heritage did not start as songs, dances, food, clothes, architecture, and archaeology. It began in response to a dire need to fulfill the material, social, and spiritual needs of society. After it became rooted in the society, it was transformed into collective practices that, over time, became an organic part of the collective memory and behaviour.

In this context, heritage becomes a cornerstone of tourism in all societies. Thus tourism means travelling of individuals and groups for entertainment, knowledge through identifying the country’s specific culture and antiquities, history, civilization, religious and natural resources. In this sense, tourism has become a premier social, cultural, political and economic level activity that targets the spreading of culture, and civilization. It is also used as a tool to strengthen relations and interactions between humans, and between civilizations and nations.

Thus, tourism is an organized act of cultural, economic, social and political, and knowledge gaining activity. It is in these categories that the importance as well as dangers of tourism emanates. It is from the same categories from which emerge the programs and tourism policies of governments. It explains why huge financial outlays are made available for tourism. How else can one understand why research centres, colleges and universities allocate generous funds to explore the multiple dimensions of tourism?

Indeed, the tourist occupies a huge space, and, in turn, strengthens the feeling of nationalism and belonging to the nation, including the development of civilization and strengthen the role of the community.

Defined as such, tourism and what is related to it became a form for resistance, and as much as it is used by nations or people to strengthen the historical role and people’s acceptance by this role. Tourism has also become viable avenue too for outside interventions for the reason of rewriting history, especially by occupying forces. They do so by arrogating the political power and strength to gain a stranglehold on the weaker parts of the nation or on whole countries. The study of Anthropology has emerged as an instrument to understand how people think in order to control them. And at the same level, the marginalization process of nations and people in order to create a history for the occupying forces is launched.

As an example of this, we can remember how occupying forces stole Egyptian heritage, the theft of Iraqi Museums, the destruction of Syrian antiquities, and the looting of
Indian, African, and South American heritage. Within this narrative, the relation between the politics, tourism and heritage are identified. When a society faces internal political projects or external challenges, everything that can be moved to counterbalance these challenges will be brought forth, such as history, spiritual values, and social traditions that magnify and unify the nation to point it in the direction that can best serve it.

In the case of the decades-old Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the relationship between politics and heritage becomes even more vital and dangerous. This is because heritage in all its forms occupies a central position and plays a decisive and fundamental role in justifying and serving the political projects that are being executed at all levels.

The basis of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is built upon the confrontation and contradiction between two narratives - the Israeli-Zionist and the Arab-Palestinian - where each attempts to use the particularity of the place (Palestine), including its religious, historical, and cultural significance, to justify its own existence and continuation.

The Zionist project concentrated from the very beginning on the religious Jewish narrative that sees in Palestine the Promised Land of the Jews. Hence any movement in this direction necessitated the rebuilding of the Jewish consciousness and turning it into a material and spiritual force to serve the Zionist project. The Zionist leadership thus defined its strategy and moved from the phase of awareness-raising to the phase of providing the necessary conditions for success.

Within this strategy, Palestine became a playground on which the space, the sphere, and the symbols were reformulated so that Palestine fitted into the Zionist narrative. In other words, a specific cultural heritage had to be constructed to harmonise with the religious narrative that tries to build legitimacy in order to justify the acquisition and control of the space with the aim of enhancing the project in the Jewish consciousness and creating an international support movement.

Since 1948, the practical translation of this strategy has worked systematically and has been well organized in various fields and at all levels. The political and military plans coalesced to reformulate the reality and to rewrite the history of Palestine in a form that responds to the aims of the Zionist project and at the same time ensuring that this new narrative creates a convincing historical depth for the project. This comprehensive project precipitated one of the most vicious processes of fraud, annihilation, and mutilation the world has ever known. The history and the culture of an entire population were erased and replaced by another which aimed to ensure the containment of the memory of the space and its history.

Within this narrative, the implementation of Israeli policies has taken two paths. First: Destroy, mutilate, and neglect everything that confirms or is a reminder of Palestinian
existence, Palestinian rights, or Palestinian history. The millennia-long history of Palestine is portrayed as though it started with the emergence of the Jewish religion when, in fact, Palestine and its people existed long before there was ever a Jewish presence. The magnitude of this policy culminated with the destruction of over 450 Palestinian villages in 1948 after their Palestinian inhabitants were expelled. The stones of these homes were stolen to be reused in the construction of Jewish homes as a sign of originality and genuineness.

After the creation of Israel, the following steps were taken: the theft of the archaeological findings, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls (which were discovered during the 1940s), pottery, and coins, and the claim of their “legal” possession; the destruction of several historic buildings that attest to hundreds of years of Palestinian existence; the destruction of Al Kasaba Quarter in Nablus during the second Intifada; the takeover of Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem, the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, and Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus; the endless excavation beneath the Haram Al Sharif in Jerusalem, searching for Solomon’s Temple in an attempt to prove the right of the Jews to the so-called Temple Mount; the Judaisation of occupied East Jerusalem by removing entire Arab neighbourhoods and the deliberate policy of expelling the Palestinian population from the city, as is happening right now in Silwan, Bustan Quarter, and Sheikh Jarrah.

The policy of colonisation in the occupied territories aimed to swallow the largest areas possible; it cut the West Bank into smaller areas with no geographical continuity and isolates Jerusalem from its Palestinian surroundings. The building of the apartheid Wall is another step in this direction. The Wall has destroyed tens of archaeological sites and has facilitated the annexation of other sites to Israel. Moreover, the settlements and the separation Wall have dramatically distorted the landscape.

Second: the implementation of Israeli policies has included rebuilding the symbols, names, and culture of specific places in order to confirm and prove the credibility and historicity of the Israeli narrative.

To achieve this goal, the Israeli authorities took over historic sites and changed their Arabic names, giving them names that match accounts from the Torah. This resulted in the renaming of hundreds of villages and archaeological sites. Examples include calling the West Bank “Judea and Samaria”; replacing Al Quds with Yerushalayim; transforming French Hill into Shapira Neighborhood; and calling Al-Khaleel “Hevron.” In addition, settlements were given biblical names such as Kiryat Arba, Efrata, Ma’aleh Adumim; and the settlement on Abu Ghneim Mountain is now called Har Homa. Architecturally distinctive Palestinian houses were taken over, as in the Talbieh neighbourhood in Jerusalem, as were dozens of other buildings spread across historical Palestine. Within the framework of this policy of piracy, the Israeli authorities created nature preserves and
built a zoo for animals mentioned in the Bible that includes specimens of the various wild animals indigenous to Palestine.

As a continuation of these policies, traditional Palestinian clothes have been presented in tourism books and offices and at international fairs as coming from the Jewish tradition. Even the Palestinian kaffiyeh, itself highly symbolic, was repackaged with the Star of David in blue. Dr. Muhammad Al-Bougi, of Al-Azhar University in Gaza, wrote in his book Resistance and Folk Culture, “After the 1967 War, Israel became active in controlling folklore and bought up thousands of Palestinian dresses that had been embroidered by Palestinian women. They were then sold in Europe with the label, “Made in Israel.” The Israelis attribute everything to themselves: ownership of the land and its cultural and financial products is the Israeli plan on the ground.”

One of the well-known examples of this policy is the export of the famous Jaffa oranges as an Israeli product, and the same thing goes for Jericho dates. At the same time vast areas of olive groves - a Palestinian symbol of pride and belonging to the land - are destroyed. Even Dead Sea salts, used in cosmetics and health products are being sold as Israeli products. Hummus and falafel are also marketed by Israel as traditional Israeli dishes.

Traditional songs and dances have also been appropriated by Israel.

Palestinians have resisted this methodical, organized Israeli policy and defended their rights and history by reaffirming the historical and cultural ties that have bound them to the land for tens of thousands of years. Dozens of centres for the protection of Palestinian folklore have been founded and have become active through the establishment of dance and folklore music groups that focus on the Canaanite influence on Palestinian culture. These centres also aid in renovating old houses in Palestinian cities, preventing the looting of archaeological artifacts, and soliciting the intervention of UNESCO to protect archaeological ruins by resisting Israeli assaults.

Civil and governmental institutions and organizations have tried to support the Palestinian tourism industry through developing folk industries and crafts such as olive wood and mother-of-pearl carving and

In short, the relationship between tourism and heritage policy in the Palestinian case reflects the status of daily engagement that rise to the level of the conflict between the Israeli occupation in its various projects aimed at grabbing and rewriting history at the historic, cultural, symbolic and cultural level, and between Palestinian people who tried in various ways to defend their heritage and rights that the Israelis are trying heavily and aggressively to remove from the geography and history of the land. In this context, heritage in all its dimensions becomes a field goal for hiring all political connotations,
and turning them into political reflections so as to redraft political awareness and memory and justify control and grab spaces and promote exclusion at all levels.