



TOURISM IN SERVICE OF OCCUPATION AND ANNEXATION

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Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Zionist leaders used religious and orientalist imagery to promote the idea of the superior Jew and the inferior Arab. In the 1930s and 40s, especially, the Tourist Development Association of Palestine used such imagery to urge European Jews to [immigrate permanently](#) to Palestine. The famed “[Visit Palestine](#)” poster was, in fact, Zionist propaganda printed in 1936 to encourage Jewish immigration to Palestine.

Since its creation in 1948, the Israeli state has upheld this practice. It continues to perpetuate the narrative of Jewish-Israeli intellectual, technological, and productive superiority over a less developed Palestinian population which it continues to subjugate and oppress. This pernicious practice is clearly visible in the Israeli Ministry of Tourism’s advertising campaigns in Jerusalem and throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), especially in settlements. Indeed, many organizations have condemned [tourism within settlements](#), and have [called for businesses](#) that operate in settlements to be held accountable for [human rights violations](#).

Settlement tourism has become an important industry for the Israeli state, especially recently with its push for annexation of parts of the West Bank and Jordan Valley. In 2016, Israel approved [\\$20 million in settlement funding](#), and the tourism minister and PM Netanyahu emphasized that the funds should be spent on developing tourism sites and hotels in illegal West Bank settlements. More recently, in January 2020, Defense Minister Naftali Bennet approved the construction of [national parks and nature reserves](#) in the West Bank as part of over \$110 million spent in the first quarter of this year on West Bank settlements.

These settler colonial policies reinforce Zionist biblical and racist claims to the land, simultaneously denying Palestinian access to natural and cultural resources for their own economic development, especially in the tourism sector. Moreover, settlement tourism perpetuates the subjugation of Palestinians. According to a [December 2017 report](#) by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Israeli Ministry of Tourism licensed over 8,000 Israeli tour guides, granting them access permits to sites throughout Israel and the West Bank, whereas approved Palestinian permits constituted 0.5% of the total.

Israel’s oppressive settler colonial industry is supported by steady streams of religious tourists, mostly Christian Zionists from the United States. Many sites of religious significance are located throughout the OPT, yet Israel claims them as Israeli historic sites. For example, Israel [demolished Palestinian homes](#) in East Jerusalem to make way for the “Bible trail” which would be part of the expansive Jerusalem Walls National Park. Another example is Tel Shiloh, an archaeological site located north of Ramallah near the Shiloh settlement, which attracts [tens of thousands of Christian Zionists](#) every year. These tourist sites, among others, are developed and funded by wealthy American families with strong ties to the Israeli government.

Passages, a US-based [religious tourism organization](#) modeled on the highly problematic Birthright Israel program, offers young American Christians trips to Israel and is subsidized by [Christian and Zionist funders](#). On its trips, Passages glorifies Israel as a modern state that manifests providential continuity to a biblical past, with little to no mention of Muslim or Palestinian history, thus rendering Palestinian displacement and oppression irrelevant.

Passages illustrates the larger infrastructure of religious tourism that serves the Zionist narrative and Israeli state-building agenda. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the complicity of Christian Zionist tourists in the ongoing dispossession and displacement of Palestinians, and in the continued denial of Palestinians of their own economic development.

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel published [a call for ethical tourism](#), asking tourists to avoid visiting sites in the OPT run by Israeli authorities. Some Palestinian Christian groups also produced [travel guides](#) encouraging Christian tourists to support Palestinian tour companies. And in the US, groups like [Eyewitness Palestine](#) provide alternative options for tourists to the Holy Land that avoid contributing to the Israeli tourism industry. Other recommendations include:

- Civil society organizations, and particularly religious organizations in the US, should critically evaluate the role of Israel-friendly tourism in legitimizing illegal annexation and human rights violations.
- Campus-based Palestine advocacy organizations in the US can play a major role in opposing student travel to the OPT. The Passages trip can serve as a key target in campaigns to prevent complicity with Israeli human rights abuse.
- Regulatory authorities and policymakers should recognize the need to end dealings with Israeli entities beyond the so-called Green Line. Businesses operating in the OPT should, at minimum, be required to adopt regulatory measures with prohibitive effects to ensure that they do not contribute to, or benefit from, illegal Israeli settlement projects.