



# TOURISM IN SERVICE OF OCCUPATION AND ANNEXATION

By [Halah Ahmad](#)

Tourism, and religious tourism more specifically, plays a direct role in legitimizing and expanding Israeli theft of Palestinian land. As annexation attempts under Netanyahu's far right-wing government backed by a Trump White House flagrantly violate global human rights governance and international law, Israeli tourism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) fundamentally enables this expansion while rendering vacationers and tourism businesses complicit. Indeed, multiple organizations have critiqued [tourism within illegal Israeli settlements](#), as well as the role of various [businesses in settlement expansion](#).

This brief discusses the historic and continuing role of the tourism industry in the early Zionist movement and the contemporary Israeli state's settler colonial project, in particular through propagating biblical ideas of eternal Jewish belonging in Palestine, and racist narratives of Jewish-Israeli superiority over Arabs in terms of governance and intelligence. The glorification of Israel in Israeli touristic advertising as an impressive modern state that manifests providential continuity with a biblical past obscures its ongoing displacement, oppression, and exploitation of Palestinians.

The brief builds on existing literature on problematic religious tourism in Israel and Palestine and offers a case study to illustrate the pernicious facets of the industry. The brief also provides a look into the role of tourism in denying Palestinians the right to develop a tourism industry for their own economic benefit, as Israel undercuts Palestinian access to their sites of archeological, religious, and natural significance. Finally, it draws attention to effective initiatives aimed at raising awareness about Israel's harmful tourism industry and offers recommendations for enabling tourists, pilgrims, and international civil society to

support Palestinian self-determination through ethical tourism.

## Tourism as Key to Zionist Settler Colonialism

Since its founders set their sights on Palestine in the late 19th century, the Zionist colonial project has professed to offer superior governance and intelligence in settling the land.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in 1944, David Ben-Gurion, a leader in the Zionist movement and Israel's first prime minister, delivered his famous speech, "[The Imperatives of the Jewish Revolution](#)," in which he suggests that Jewish laborers would be teachers who bring "modern cultural, scientific, and technical knowledge" to make "the wilderness bloom." [Zionist iconography](#) from the early 20th century reflects these notions of superior Jewish development and "[Hebrew Labor](#)." Moshe Shertok, Israel's second prime minister, echoed this idea with pejorative views of Arabs: "We have not come to an empty land to inherit it, but we have come to conquer a country from people inhabiting it, that governs it by virtue of its language and savage culture."<sup>2</sup>

Early Zionist advertising produced by the Tourist Development Association of Palestine utilized vibrant imagery and [religious symbolism](#) to encourage European Jews to immigrate to Palestine, a key example of which is the famous "[Visit Palestine](#)" poster designed by Franz Krausz in 1936. The objectives of posters commissioned by the Tourist Development Association of Palestine were not to encourage temporary visits, but, in fact, to [encourage permanent immigration](#).

1. Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Year's War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 7.

2. Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 91.

During the early waves of Zionist settlement in Palestine, Zionist organizations also emphasized investment in hotels, with [several dozen emerging](#) between 1917 and 1948. Importantly, the Tourist Development Association of Palestine also used [maps of Palestine](#) to depict biblical Jewish sites on top of existing topographies, ultimately constructing a visual anchor both for imagining Jewish continuity in Palestine from antiquity to the present, and for planning extensive colonial settlement that would obscure any notion of Palestinian belonging.

Zionists deployed archaeology in an endless pursuit to legitimize their claims to the land. As anthropologist Nadia Abu El-Haj argues in her landmark book, *Facts on the Ground*, Zionist organizations and early Israeli society in the 1950s and 60s emphasized archeology as a “national hobby” which was crucial to the “formation and enactment of colonial-national imagination and in the substantiation of its territorial claims.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Edward Said noted that Zionists actively removed Palestine and Palestinians from the historical record through tourism predicated on selective archeology and orientalist depictions of Arabs and Palestinians.<sup>4</sup> In other words, archeology was a tool of legitimation tied fundamentally to touristic and communal recreation, forming the basis for what have emerged as some of the most popular touristic destinations in the present. Since its creation in 1948, the state of Israel has upheld the Zionist agenda, with a narrative of infrastructural, intellectual, and productive superiority [over the Palestinian population](#) it continues to suppress through military occupation and continued displacement. Moreover, today, the Israeli Ministry of Tourism perpetuates notions of Israeli advancement and superior intelligence alongside tenuous and refutable claims to biblical histories that provide a [false sense of continuity](#) with the past.

Israel’s continued utilization of biblical narratives that exclude Palestinians in official guides and tours is especially visible in Jerusalem, the epicenter of religious tourism. Israeli tour guides in Jerusalem particularly target Christian and Jewish visitors, with itineraries and site descriptions that often exclusively highlight Judeo-Christian histories. In 2011, the Ministry of Tourism described Jerusalem’s Muslim Quarter as follows: “The

Moslem Quarter has churches and mosques, and there are several Jewish homes and Yeshivas still remaining,” while omitting that Jewish homes in that quarter have been [acquired recently](#), often by extremist Zionist settler colonists backed by the Israeli military.<sup>5</sup> More recently, as the Israeli government has promised annexation of the Jordan Valley and parts of the West Bank, Israel’s Ministry of Tourism has emphasized [tourism in West Bank settlements](#) as an area of strategic investment. To be sure, this encompasses tourism in Israeli-controlled settlements deemed illegal under international law, and excludes Palestinian cities and towns, most of which Israelis are forbidden from entering by the Israeli state.

Israel’s tourism campaigns in the West Bank, in addition to the development of [archeological tourist sites](#) on occupied Palestinian lands, reinscribe the [illegal theft of Palestinian land](#). Both historic and present tourism partaking in the illegal settlement enterprise fast-track Israeli annexation within the larger Zionist colonial project, and are complicit in denying Palestinians the right to their land and to self-determination.

## The Damaging Impacts of Settlement Tourism

[Illegal Israeli settlements](#) in the OPT constitute threats to Palestinian self-determination. They also deny Palestinian access to, and use of, natural and cultural resources. Indeed, settlers’ exploitation of these resources for tourism obstructs Palestinian economic development, creating dependency on foreign aid and advancing the prosperity of Israel’s colonial settlement enterprise. That is, the success and sustainability of Israel’s colonial enterprise through settlement tourism depends on the wider economic and military suppression inflicted upon Palestinians through settlements.

To illustrate the extent of Israel’s colonial enterprise in the OPT, it is important to contextualize the disparate access to land and resources between Palestinians and the Israeli state. Notably, over 60% of the West Bank constitutes Area C, which falls under full Israeli administrative and military control. A 2017 [UN OCHA report](#) indicated that over 10% of the West Bank is

3. Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 2.

4. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 158.

5. Yara Hawari, “The Old City of Jerusalem; Whose Heritage? Tourism, Narratives and Orientalism” (unpublished thesis, 2011) page 22, typescript.

within settlement municipal boundaries, constituting additional buffer zones surrounding settlements to which Palestinians are forbidden access. While the physical boundaries of the settlements constitute under 5% of the West Bank, a 2013 UN Human Rights Council report indicated that [over 43% of the West Bank](#) is under the jurisdiction of Israeli settlement councils. Additionally, the report showed that these councils control 86% of the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea.

Al-Haq, an independent Palestinian non-governmental human rights organization, has published multiple reports on the economic [exploitation of Palestinian land](#) and resources in the West Bank for [settlement tourism](#). Its April 2020 report [implicates tourism companies](#) and their home countries for involvement in the settlement enterprise in the West Bank, among other occupied territories. As a result of such reports, tourism companies operating in Israeli settlements, such as Airbnb, have become the subject of grassroots [campaigns for divestment](#) and [accountability for human rights violations](#). Additionally, Amnesty International has [critiqued several companies](#) for operating in and profiting from Israeli settlements, with notable big names in the tourism industry such as TripAdvisor, Expedia, Booking.com, and Airbnb.

In December 2017, the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) produced a report that documented the negative impacts of touristic development in the settlements on the [Palestinian tourism sector](#). The report underscores that if Area C were transferred to Palestinian control, as envisioned in the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian economy would grow dramatically, equivalent to a 35% increase in GDP, according to the 2017 UN OCHA report. However, in 2016, when Israel approved [\\$20 million in settlement funding](#), the Israeli tourism minister and Prime Minister Netanyahu both emphasized that tourism sites and the construction of hotels in the West Bank settlements were primary targets for those funds. Then, in January 2020, Defense Minister Naftali Bennett 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 the year on West Bank settlements – the [highest in a decade](#).

Israel also actively denies Palestinians economic development in their own tourism sector by restricting the movement of tourists, Palestinian tourism professionals, and tourism vehicles. In the December 2017 report, the PLO documented the disparate licensing practices of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, finding that Israeli tour guides numbered over 8,000 in approved access permits to sites throughout Israel and the West Bank, whereas approved Palestinian permits constituted 0.5%. The Palestinian Authority (PA) has also requested permits to develop over 10 touristic sites throughout the West Bank. As with similar [efforts in East Jerusalem](#), Israel has systematically denied these.

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Such obstacles to Palestinian development represent an active continuity of early Zionist narratives of superior ability to develop the land, in a self-fulfilling prophesy then utilized to represent a biblically ordained destiny. Indeed, in addition to being sites for corporate profit, Israeli settlements have become staging grounds for strengthening “the [connection of the Jewish people](#) to the land of Israel.”

### **Religious Tourism in Support of Israeli Settler Colonialism**

Religious tourism is fundamental to the Zionist narrative of biblical rights and the continuity of Jewish settlement in Palestine. The Palestinian cities of Bethlehem, Jericho, Nablus, Ramallah, al-Khalil (Hebron), and villages such as Sabastia and Burqin, are among multiple sites of major religious significance in the Abrahamic tradition. Many of these sites are centers of Christian tourism, which continues to play a particularly important role in the propagation of Zionist colonial narratives, especially among tourists from the United States. While these sites are located in the OPT and would be critical to attracting pilgrims to boost the Palestinian tourism sector, Israel claims them as Israeli historic sites.



Several problematic sites appear consistently in the itineraries of Zionist religious tourism programs and trips. Herodion, for example, an archaeological site and national park in the West Bank, sees disruptive excavations and artifact removal despite the PA's objections on [grounds of legality](#). These excavations have also left nearby [villages without water](#) for up to three weeks at a time. Moreover, though it is an illegal settlement built on land belonging to the Palestinian village of Bil'in, in flagrant violation of international and even [Israeli law](#), the Israeli government recognized Modi'in Illit as an Israeli city. Another site is the Biyar Aqueduct, a 2,000 year-old Roman ruin that, while marketed as an Israeli heritage site, is located in occupied Palestinian land, [reinforcing narratives](#) of ancient Jewish history to legitimize and continue occupation of the land. In 2014 alone, tours of the aqueduct [generated a revenue of \\$4.5 million](#).

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Jerusalem Walls National Park is another example, built in occupied East Jerusalem and used at different times to justify [demolishing Palestinian homes](#) in the name of clearing way for the “Bible trail.” Another common site is Tel Shiloh, an archeological site on occupied Palestinian territory that [attracts tens of the thousands](#) of Christian tourists annually, and where a biblical theme park was developed with funding from the Falic family in the US, which [supports right-wing settler groups](#) and settlement development. Israel's appropriation of these sites – in addition to many others throughout occupied East Jerusalem, such as the City of David (Silwan), the Garden of Gethsemane (Mount of Olives), and the Via Dolorosa (Old City) – for religious tourism, bolsters Zionist narratives of eternal Jewish belonging in order to negate issues of Palestinian displacement.

In that vein, major Zionist funders and supporters of the Israeli state have for decades underwritten religious tourism to Israel under the banner of [interfaith relations](#), support for Israel, or pilgrimage. Figures like [Naty Saidoff](#), Sheldon Adelson, Steve Green, Ira Rennert, Roger Hertog, Simon Falic and the Falic family, as well as current US Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, are among mega-donors and fundraisers who underwrite both Israeli settlement development – including explicitly touristic development such as wineries – and US-based pro-Israel [Zionist advocacy](#) and education. Notably, several of these donors are also [documented funders](#) of far-right, Islamophobic groups within the US.

As religious tourists continue to engage in these illegal and racist developments, they become part of propagating Zionist settler-colonial strategy, materially supporting the theft and occupation of Palestinian land, and the ongoing abuse of Palestinian human rights. The following case study illustrates the harm caused to Palestinians by the Christian Zionist tourism industry.

### **Passages: A Case Study in Christian Zionist Tourism**

Passages is a US-based [religious tourism organization](#) that considers it “a rite of passage for every Christian” to visit Israel and to “make Israel's story part of [one's] own.” The program is highly subsidized by conservative [Christian and Jewish funders](#), and is available at 157 universities and organizations in the US. The universities are largely Christian, but they also include some large public universities such as Texas A&M, the University of Florida, and the University of Minnesota, among others. Passages also boasts over 7,000 alumni across the US. Unsurprisingly, Passages has explicit connections to the Israeli government and was [reportedly the brain-child](#) of Ron Dermer, Israel's ambassador to the US. Dermer hosted the program's launch at the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, in 2015. The event was also attended by US ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, and former Israeli ambassador to the US, Michael Oren.

Research on Passages by [Friends of Sabeel North America](#) (FOSNA), along with a handful of campus-based Palestine solidarity organizations, reveals the problematic itineraries used on trips, including the

sites on tourists' itineraries as well as the Christian Zionist narratives relayed throughout.<sup>6</sup> On its trips, Passages glorifies Israel as a modern state that manifests providential continuity with a biblical past, conveniently rendering Palestinian displacement and oppression invisible and irrelevant. This Zionist narrative is emblematic of Israel's exploitation of religious tourism in validating and enabling its colonial project, and in falsely framing the situation as a territorial dispute (between superiors and savages, no less) rather than an occupation.

In addition to problematic visits to the [occupied Golan Heights](#) and former Israeli Defense Force (IDF) outposts, FOSNA reports that the trip seeks to highlight the persecution of Christians in the Middle East as well as the perceived dramatic vulnerability of Israel, framing several days of the trip around Israel's risks from its neighbors, including with a trip to Sderot, the Israeli city overlooking Gaza. Sderot is not a city with religious significance for Christian travelers, and it is known for its residents' far right-wing views. Indeed, Sderot is the site of the notorious incident of residents [setting up lawn chairs](#) to watch [Israel's bombardment of Gaza](#) in the 2014 offensive that killed over 2,000 Palestinians and 73 Israelis.

Passages is explicit in its aim to develop pro-Israel sentiment among emerging Christian leaders in the US. It is modeled after [Birthright Israel](#), or *Taglit*, which offers fully-funded, [highly propagandized](#) trips for young American Jews to visit Israel and which, in recent years, has been [opposed by national campaigns](#) from progressive US-based Jewish organizations for its misleading representations of Israel. However, the Passages trips are surrounded by much less critical attention, and much fewer resources documenting and countering their problematic programs.

Importantly, while Passages trips focus on the Christian religious experience in the Holy Land, they explicitly aim to connect the fact of being in Israel with support for the Israeli state. Indeed, the Passages itinerary highlights conversations with Israeli soldiers, a tour of the Israeli Knesset, and cultural experiences to understand "Israeli start up culture" and Israel's "economic engine." At the same time, trip itineraries overlook – or superficially engage – with Muslim and Palestinian histories in the region and do

not problematize the illegal occupation of many of the religious sites visited in the West Bank. In fact, a particular narrative of Christian and Jewish persecution and of Israel as a religious haven lends itself to a project of Islamophobic othering common in many American media outlets.

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[Testimonies from alumni](#) of the Passages trips mirror the perspectives curated by the tourism company, and it is unsurprising that Passages highlights these testimonies on its website. For example, one trip participant writes, “I am not the same person I was upon my departure for Israel. I have a new drive to stand with Israel, sensing that God’s plan for my life post-college is to support the Holy Land in my future occupation. My heart is filled with a passion to be united with Israel thanks to Passages.” The political aspiration to “stand with Israel” implies an antagonism for critique of the Israeli state, and as a faith-based program, the trip ultimately succeeds in conflating biblical or spiritual engagement with the Holy Land with the secular Zionist colonial project.

One trip participant emphasized that her trip to Israel was particularly special not only for the visits to biblical sites, but for the opportunity to learn about Israel as a “modern state.” Such a characterization bespeaks the Zionist agenda of promoting visions of an awe-inspiring, technologically advanced state and people that are often juxtaposed with orientalist views of Arabs as underdeveloped. Another wrote that her trip “placed Israel and the Jewish people at the center of my mind when I consider my Christian faith [...] I find myself talking about Israel to anyone who is willing to listen.” Some participants’ statements discuss a feeling of genuine interfaith engagement with the “conflict” while also consistently emphasizing admiration for the modern Israeli state.

6. FOSNA and a few anonymous university solidarity groups gained access to a Passages itinerary and shared it with the author for the purpose of this brief. The itinerary is unpublished, but information in this section related to the Passages trips comes directly from the itinerary.

What many of the testimonials have in common is an uncanny recapitulation of Zionist propaganda around superior advancement in the Middle East, a narrative of divine providence embodied in the Jewish state, and an explicit connection between ancient and biblical history and the modern state of Israel – all with little to no discussion of the intervening two thousand years which heavily feature Islamic history as well as the Zionist settler colonial displacement of Palestinians. This framing continues to obscure – indeed, to justify – Israel’s oppression of Palestinians.

Passages illustrates the larger infrastructure of religious tourism that serves the Zionist colonial narrative and Israeli state-building agenda. This is particularly evident in the context of expanded annexation attempts by Netanyahu, who has cultivated strong political ties with [US evangelicals](#), roughly 80% of whom identify as Christian Zionists. Passages is among [several such programs](#) which purport to promote interreligious dialogue while actively and explicitly mobilizing support for Israel’s historic and ongoing colonial project in Palestine. Not only do these trips work to silence and invalidate Palestinian histories and narratives, they also materially support a tourism sector in illegally-occupied Palestinian lands that systematically undercuts Palestinians’ own attempts at sustainable economic viability.

## Alternatives and Recommendations

In 2019, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) published [a call for ethical tourism](#) from Palestinian civil society organizations. The statement asks tourists to “do no harm” by avoiding [historical or religious sites](#) in the OPT that are run by Israeli authorities or that are promoted as Israeli sites. Similarly, Palestinian Christian groups produced a [travel guide](#) calling on Christian tourists to support Palestinian tour companies such as the [Walk Palestine tours](#), offered by the Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies in Beit Sahur, and avoid Israeli tour packages or Israeli-operated sites in the OPT.

US-based groups such as [Eyewitness Palestine](#) also provide alternative options for pilgrims or other tourists to visit Palestine while avoiding complicity with Israeli oppression and occupation. In addition, a growing number of “Palestine Trek” initiatives on university campuses such as Harvard, Cambridge, and

Berkeley, provide opportunities for ethical tourism in Palestine that can avoid “faithwashing” representations of Israel and material contributions to the Israeli tourism industry. These alternatives, among others, reinforce Palestinian human rights and dignity and serve as models for civil society to advocate for alternatives.

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 abuse of Palestinians’ human rights.
- Campus-based Palestine advocacy organizations in the US can play a major role in opposing student travel to the OPT, and to other occupied territories. The Passages trip can serve as a key target in campaigns to prevent complicity with Israeli human rights abuse, as part of a larger campaign to [end the Israeli occupation](#) by conditioning the US’s [military aid to Israel](#) on compliance with international law.
- 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.



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