

# Religious Tourism in Palestine:

“Monopoly, Exclusion & Entrenchment of Israel’s Annexation”

## Key Information



• Palestine is very rich with tourist and pilgrimage sites of immense value for the 3 Abrahamic faiths. With millions of incoming tourists and pilgrims, its tourism industry with all its interconnected services, such as accommodation, trade, and transportation, often generates significant revenue for the Palestinian government and positively impacts employment rate.



• In the first half of 2023, for example, Bethlehem hotels received the largest number of guests with 58% of the total number of hotel guests compared to other Palestinian cities that represent touristic and religious hubs for the three main religions in the world.



• However, despite the great significance of the tourism industry, it remains hostage to Israel’s policies of monopoly over the whole sector, for its own economic benefit even inside the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), while advancing its exclusive historic and religious narratives and claims.



• Besides the benefits from the ever-increasing economic profits derived from its occupation of Palestinian lands and the exploitation of its rich resources and heritage, Israel’s control over religious tourism in Palestine perpetuates its annexation efforts while marginalizing Palestinian presence and narratives.

## Policies & Human Rights Violations

### Monopoly over all aspects of the sector

• Israeli control over tourism includes the exclusive control over border crossings to and from both sides of the Green Line, even inside the oPt, visa issuance and entry conditions to visitors on both sides of the Green Line, and the licensing of tour guides thus controlling the narrative through tour guides. The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism has no say on such policies and cannot intervene to change any.

• Israel also capitalizes on all means of accommodation and hospitality since it controls the ins and outs of the sector. Normally, Israeli tour operators allow tourists a few hours in Palestinian sites, and exclude Palestinian hotels and businesses from the benefits of the stay of incoming tourism and pilgrimage. It also excludes Palestinian tourism businesses from commercial opportunities.

• Israel arbitrarily controls the entry and exit of all tourists and pilgrims, even those who wish to only visit the oPt. Israel continues to deny entries to foreigners who have expressed solidarity with Palestinians or those of Palestinian / Arab origins.

• Israel promotes its exclusive narrative to the history, culture and religion through its licensing process and conditions of tour guides. For example, international tourists coming through Israeli tourism agencies, learn about religious sites and tourist attractions from an Israeli narrative which erases any Palestinian rights and historic ties to these places. In East Jerusalem, for Palestinian tour guides to be authorized to practice their profession, they have to take courses in learning history from an Israeli context and this is the only narrative they are allowed to present.

• Such policies, among many others, significantly hinder the Palestinian tourism industry and infringes upon the Palestinians’ right to economic development.

### Settlement Tourism

• Israel invests heavily in illegally developing settlement infrastructure for tourism sites inside the occupied West Bank. This investment has had the effect of exacerbating Palestinians’ dispossession and disconnection from their own cultural and religious heritage.

• Two of the most visited sites by incoming visitors to Israel are the Old City of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, both located inside occupied Palestinian territory yet misleadingly labeled as ‘proper’ Israeli lands,



Nativity- Jesus birth place  
© Ramzi A. Hodali

contributing to the erasure of the Palestinian identity and presence. According to Israeli Ministry of Tourism figures, 45% of foreign visitors went to the Dead Sea, much of which is in the oPt.

- Israel has increased its support to the tourism industry linked to settlements in recent years. For example, in 2010, it allocated approximately US\$110 million to protect and develop visitor infrastructure at historic sites “that reflect the national heritage of the Jewish people” across Israel and the oPt. These sites included 13 in East Jerusalem and 30 in the rest of the West Bank.

- According to one settlement council (Yesha), only during the Passover holiday in 2018, some 300,000 people visited various “tourist sites, routes, museums, festivals, wineries and archaeological sites”, many of which are located across Area C of the oPt.

### **Biblical Archaeology as a Tool of Annexation**

- Archaeological practices and site management became tools for territorial claims, emphasizing an exclusive historical narrative that disenfranchises Palestinian heritage and supports the Judaization (imposing an exclusive Jewish identity) of the occupied Palestinian lands. Some examples include:

- Mount Herodium, located in the Bethlehem Governorate and was built over 2000 years ago, is a great example of how Israel has not only been seeking to exert full authority over archeological sites in the occupied West Bank, but also strategically exploiting such authority to erase any historical existence of the Palestinians owning this site or maintaining it. It also attracts large numbers of tourists to this site which is illegally annexed from Palestinian-owned lands.

- Solomon’s Pools are an archaeological site of ancient water reservoirs located south of Bethlehem, an Islamic waqf (trust) and considered as an archaeological reserve since 1929. The site has been attacked multiple times by Israeli settlers, under the protection of the Israeli forces, to perform religious rituals, with the objective of turning the site into a Jewish site after obliterating its history: Palestinian, Muslim and Christian.

### **Impact**

- Israeli tourism monopoly deprives Palestinians of vital economic benefits from religious tourism, particularly in historically significant areas like Bethlehem, leading to increased unemployment and economic dependency.

- Israel's control over tourism and archaeological sites skews the historical narrative, overshadowing Palestinian cultural and religious heritage, particularly affecting the representation and management of

Christian pilgrimage sites.

- Through its control of tourism narratives, Israel manipulates Christian pilgrims' understanding of the region, promoting a one-sided history that marginalizes Palestinian narratives and indirectly supports the normalization of Israeli annexation and occupation.

### **Recommendations**

1. Enhancing ethical pilgrimage by advocating for respect Palestinian narratives and supporting the local economy, especially pilgrimage at Christian sites.

2. Investing in Palestinian tourism by promoting development at historic sites, ensuring they are accessible and managed by Palestinians to benefit local communities.

To learn more about religious tourism in Palestine, read the Report titled “Religious Tourism in Palestine: Monopoly, Exclusion & Entrenchment of Israel’s Annexation” prepared by the Balasan Initiative for Human Rights (BIHR):



Report



**Balasan Initiative**  
for Human Rights

**HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG**  
PALESTINE & JORDAN

“This document has been produced with the support of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. The views expressed herein are those of the BIHR and therefore do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.”

2024

September