

RELIGIOUS TOURISM: EXPERIENCE OF PALESTINE

¹JAFAR SUBHI HARDAN ABAHRE

Department of Tourism and Archeology, Faculty of Humanities
An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine
Email: abahre@najah.edu

²AKRAM SUBHI SULEIMAN

Department Civil Engineering, Faculty of Engineering
Isra University, Amman, Jordan
Email: abahre@yahoo.com

Abstract

Palestine is a holy land and cradle of many civilizations by home of three major religions in the world: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. It hosts many important religious cities such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Hebron and Jericho. Despite being such a small country, Palestine is rich in religious sites, cultural, natural and heritage which support its economy. Palestine has not only been the site for many conflicts between Arabs and Israelis, but also attracts religious tourists from all over the world. This paper had comparing between tourism situation throughout a peace process between Palestinian and Israelis and after break down of peace. This paper also discusses challenges faced by the tourism industry in Palestine affected by the Israel occupation and control, especially on the movement of tourists and pilgrims to the holy sites. It also reports background on religious based tourism and development in the area and will discuss many important and related issues. This study suggests that the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis can be achieved with serious negotiations and this, in return will benefit tourism sector of the region, reflecting more peaceful image which would encourage more visits by tourists. The implication of this research was light on peace as a force for tourism.

Keywords: Palestine, Crisis, Peace, Religious Tourism.

1. Introduction

Palestine, located in a point connecting the continents of Africa and Asia; the Mediterranean Sea from west, Jordan from east, Lebanon from north, Syrian Arab republic in the east north, and the Arab republic of Egypt from south. The area of historical Palestine is 27,000 square kilometers, with Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

The area of the Palestinian territories which is administered by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA); is more than 6000 square kilometer -5690 square kilometer, in the West Bank and 365 square kilometer in Gaza Strip. The lowest point resides at Dead Sea 408 m, and the highest point at Jabal al-Assur 1,015 m. The border crossings for Palestine are from Jericho Bridge and Sheikh Hussein Bridge to Jordan and from Rafah border to Egypt (ATG, 2005).

1.1 Tourism in Palestine

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2014), hotel activities in the Palestinian territory by the numbers of guests in the year of 2014 were 610,347 person, by

percentage: 31.9% were from the European Union countries, 8.9% Palestinians, 11.1% from Israel, 9.6% from Asia, 9.8% from USA & Canada, 20.0% from other countries 8.7%.

The policy of Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities ought them to be responsible for carrying out the tourism development strategy; through the tourism promotion policies for locals, regionalists, and internationals as well as operating, maintaining and protecting all PNA cultural tourism sites, along with other tourism activities in Palestine (PECDAR, 2001).

1.2 Religious Tourism in Palestine

Palestine has a lot of holy cities which are famous in the world. Most of the holy sites are found in Palestine; these holy places attract everyone, it has spiritual and secular connection that bond the whole globe.

According to Cohen and Katz (2001) in their study; there are five types of tourist attractions in Palestine, and some of the most important religious factors; which play an important role in Palestine, while magnetizing many pilgrims to visit Palestine starting from the beginning of the nineteenth century and over the past years. Palestine is a sacred place for the three divine religions and attracts all tourists in the world to visit because of the unique holiness.

Jerusalem; the capital of three religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Jerusalem contains sacred places important for all Muslims in the world such as Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of The Rock. During where the prophet Mohammed ascended onto sky on his famous night trip "Israa' and Mia'raj", and where Abraham approximately sacrificed his son. On the other side The Mosque of Omar can be seen in the Christian quarter, where caliph Omar Ibn al-khattab prayed outside the church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Other holy places for Christians are the church of Holy Sepulchre and via dolorosa that the Christians pilgrims coming to see where Jesus was crucified, and the way of the cross fourteen situations during where is held, laid, patience and interment. And see The Tomb of Virgin Mary at foot the Mount of Olives.

The sacred sites for Jews, Al-Buraq Wall or known for them by Wailing Wall, the Jews think that this wall has been part of Solomon's legendary temple. Pilgrims Jews comes to pray in this place.

Bethlehem city or birthplace of Jesus, located in south Jerusalem, attracts many of Christians from the world to visit, to see and pray where Christ was born in the Church of nativity and Bethlehem have many religious sites, monasteries and churches, as church of Saint Catherine, Chapel of the Milk Grotto, Rachel's Tomb, Solomon's Pools, Herodion Site and Omar Mosque.

Nazareth situated in southwest of the Sea of Galilee about 15 miles and 20 miles west of the Mediterranean Sea ,the home of holy family for Joseph and Mary. The pilgrims of Christians are coming to visit the Mary's well, St. Gabriel's Greek Orthodox church St, Joseph's church, The White Mosque.

Hebron (Al Khalil) located in south Bethlehem, this town is very important because it was referred since before Common Era, which is believed that after expulsion Adam and eve from garden of Eden lived in Hebron; Muslims, Christians and Jews consider as the place of Abraham burial, the Abraham mosque, and another sacred site in beit Ilanim, where an angel told Abraham and Sarah his wife would bear a child.

Jericho, the oldest city on earth (Tell es-Sultan), contains many holy sites for Christians, Muslims and Jews as sites of prophet Musa, Monastery of the Qurantel, Hisham's palace, Qumran(The Dead Sea Scrolls) and Jordan River where site of Jesus Christ baptism. In south Jericho lies the Dead Sea (The Salt Sea).

Nablus city has many religious sites as Joseph's Tomb; Church of Jacob's well, Mount Jarzim and the Samaritans, and Sabastiya in the northwest Nablus. Jenin city, there is holy site for Christians; church of burqen where Jesus cured ten lepers. Gaza Strip forms the westernmost portion of the Palestinian territories in Southwest Asia, having on sacred places for Muslims and Christians such as the al Omari Mosque, St.Porphyrus church and the tomb hashem and mosque, the grandfather of Prophet Mohammed.

2. Tourism and Crisis

Cooper & et al. (2005).Focus on security, safety and risks to travel associated with acts of war, terrorism and natural disasters such as floods, avalanches and earthquake, Discussion of the crisis and effect of terrorism on some destination in the world, and a case study of impact on Bali bombings and 11 September in the year 2001. The WTO defines a crisis as: *"Any unexpected event that affects traveler confidence in a destination and interferes with the ability to operate normally."*

Beirman, D. (2001) focused on the political crisis between Israel and Palestine and had also impacted on Jordanian and Palestinian travel industries and carriers, during stop of tourism growth in September 2000 and the failure of both Israeli government and the Palestinian authority to reach acceptable agreement. China Daily, (2006) describes the situation as gloomy for west bank hotels, during the Jericho intercontinental hotel and Bethlehem, whereas there are plenty of spare rooms its. Six years on the palm tree lined hotel sits forlorn to all cites in the west bank, A Victim of continued unrest, a slump in tourism, and the decaying Palestinian economy. Munzer Izhiman ; worked for the intercontinental group for 20 years. He says: "no profit, just covering expenses", where there were once more than 200 staff, now there are barely 50 and just five of the hotel's rooms which usually go for between US \$100 and US \$150 a night were booked.

2.1 The Impacts of Political Crisis on Tourism in Palestine

By PCBS, (2006) it is described that the Israeli closure was imposed on the Palestinian territory; this closure had affected negatively all aspects of Palestinian life, mainly the tourism activities. There is a big decline in the total number of guests in the Palestinian territory hotels (151.801); they declined by percentage of 52.1% compared with the year 1999.

All borders in Palestine from air, the land and sea are under the Israeli control because of that there are no statistics about the tourists from arrivals and departures, but only from the hotels and other tourism activities. When the second "Intifada" began in October 2000; The Israeli tanks reoccupied the Bethlehem area for ten days, 23 people were killed, and the entire infrastructure related in tourism was destructed as hotels, transportation, heritage sites, hospitals... etc. The world heritage committee condemns the damage and destruction caused to the cultural heritage in Palestine.

The restrictive policies imposed by the Israeli occupation authorities. Palestinian tourism has not yet been able in any way to exploit its enormous potential for attracting international and regional tourists. The current state of the Palestinian tourism infrastructure is incompatible with the tourist attractions available. There has been a tragic absence of planning in the tourism sector because of 37 years of occupation. Tourism in Palestine has been an Israeli monopoly since the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine, resulting in an almost total isolation of the Palestinian people from tourists, a separation carefully orchestrated by Israel in order to project a negative image of Palestinians in general.

There are in Palestinian territories many of checkpoints from Israeli which impacts on Palestinian tourism sector that detrimentally effect on tourists' movement on visits of the tourism sites, at the same time detrimental effect on local community and the hotel employees who work in the tourism cities in Palestine.

The Israel started to build the segregation wall on the occupied Palestinian lands in June 2002. After that, became there are many negative impacts on the Environmental, economic and social life of the Palestinians. Through a tourism there are a big size of impacts within the feeling the tourists this is area do not have a safety and independence.

Elaine, K. (1999) reported that the professor (Saleem Zoughbi) from Bethlehem University explained how tourism in Bethlehem suffered during the Israeli occupation, whereas Israel brought tourists to Bethlehem for an hour. And warned not to eat or drink in Bethlehem.

Fishman, B. (2005) according to The Israel Ministry of Tourism describes the situation of the tourism in Israel after five years from "Intifada". The number of tourists to Israel in the year 2000 was high as of 2.8 million to fewer than a million in 2002, and most of the Israeli tourism work force became without a job. Ashkenazi), who managed Jerusalem's olive tree hotel until 2001, said "there was no one in the hotel".

China Daily, (2006) describes When "Hamas" group won Palestinian elections, business became in the depression, with foreign tourists and pilgrims staying away because financial sanctions imposed by the west against Hamas government. The hoteliers are hoping that the holy month of Ramadan revives the business, and religious pilgrims will visit at Christmas.

("Flame-out Palestinian territories," 2002) represents what happened in the Bethlehem and tourism industry of Bethlehem as significant for Christians; since it is the birthplace of Jesus, and chosen as the location of a major tourism development by international aid donors and others. Bethlehem 2000 project, lead up to the millennium .the goal was to attract 4.5 million tourists in the 16 months between Christmas 1999, and Easter 2001. Israeli soldiers took over the hotel during the ten-day reoccupation and damaged all things in the hotel. Based on this report an 86% decline in religious visitors occurred in the first half of 2001. (Khalil Shokeh), the chamber's managing director in the year 2001, said that the tourism in Bethlehem has a bleak future. In start of "Intifada" in September 2000 the Israeli army closed the airport, damaged the few planes owned by the Palestinian Airlines, and ploughed up the airport's runway.

3. Conclusion

This study discussed that Palestine has religious importance as it contains important religious sites of the three monotheistic religions of Muslims, Christians and Jews. But Palestine now

exposed to the impact of Israeli occupation negatively on the destruction of tourism in general, and religious tourism in particular, this had been led because of occupation, and the lack of security in Palestine to reduce the economic impact of tourism and revenue which brings a lot of foreign currencies and provide many job opportunities for Palestinians, and also because of the Israeli occupation and governance by limitations. And tourist sites as Jerusalem which is a religiously importance for Muslims and control led to denial of more than one billion of Muslims in the world to visit holy sites to in Palestine. All of the indications; evidences and statistics that speak about the reality of tourism in Palestine show that the tourism situation in Palestine is in the direction of the going worse, because of the Israeli policies that limit the movement of tourists and the destruction of the holy places in Palestine. Therefore, this study proposes involving all the nations of the world, and the World Heritage Committee to protect the cultural and natural heritage in Palestine, also put the heritage sites in Palestine on the list of world's heritage in danger, because of the effect of conflict on all sites. And Muslim nations to finish the problem of security, the occupation and tension that occurs in Palestine, and also proposes the study of activating the peace process through negotiations, toward peace with justice, by which there would be a return of tourism and the revitalization of the movement of tourism and increase the number of tourists to will visit Palestine.

Lastly, the future of tourism in Palestine is still vague until now, Because of that Palestine is still under Israeli occupation and not an independent state. So I hope in the near future to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas and tourism flourished in Palestine in order to play an effective role in attracting religious tourism and different types of tourism for visitors to visit it. The future Palestinian tourism is associated to the achievement of the peace process. It is significantly important that Palestine create itself as a regional destination through collaboration and coordination with neighboring countries.

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