



Palestine's Heritage under Occupation

In Focus: Bethlehem's Denied Potential

With a unique history and geographic location, Palestine is a land of heritage par excellence. A land that has been linked to civilizations, empires, prophets, and saints and one which has evolved into a cultural mosaic that represents tremendous potential for Palestine's present and future.

However, the Israeli occupying authority with its attempts to impose Jewish-Zionist exclusivity over the land, has threatened this historical identity. An example is the case of Jerusalem, a known city for its pluralism before the *Nakba* and the Israeli occupation. The fabric of the city comprised of Assyrians, Muslims, Armenians, Jews, Copts, Catholics, Orthodox, Moroccans, Gypsies, Africans, and Maronites, were amongst those who flourished in the city. The Israeli occupation with full support from the Trump Administration has declared the city its "eternal and undivided capital". This has encouraged the current right-wing Israeli administration to pass the racist "Jewish Nation-State Bill" by the Israeli parliament that only recognizes full rights for Jews in the land of historic Palestine.

Despite Israel's policies and measures, Palestine has exerted tremendous efforts to preserve its heritage and to counter the systematic denial of the country's tourism potential. Among those efforts is Palestine's membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Heritage Organization (UNESCO), achieved in October 2011.

Currently, there are four sites listed as World Heritage Sites within the territory of the State of Palestine: Jerusalem's Old City (inscribed by Jordan in 1981), the Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route (Bethlehem), Battir, including the Makhrouk Valley (Battir/Beit Jala), and the Old City of Hebron/Al Khalil (Hebron). This media brief focuses on the Palestinian sites located in the Bethlehem Governorate.

Bethlehem: "Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route"

- Palestine's first World Heritage site inscribed in 2012.
- The site includes a buffer zone¹, which is mainly the historic city of Bethlehem, also referred to as Bethlehem's Old City.
- Palestine considers a future nomination that includes the Old City of Bethlehem (the "buffer zone") as well as the Old Towns of Beit Sahour (including "Shepherds Field") and the Monastery of Mar Saba (founded in 483 AD), one of the oldest still-inhabited monasteries in the world.

¹ Buffer Zone: It's the area that surrounds any World Heritage Site that provides a protection layer for the site.

- Saint Helena built the Church of the Nativity in the year 339 AD over the place where Jesus Christ is believed to be born.
- The Church of the Nativity includes three convents: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic (Franciscan), and Armenian. The “Pilgrimage Route,” known locally as “Star Street,” is 712 meters long, which is the original road that marks the entrance of pilgrims into Bethlehem. It is also the road used by the Patriarchs of Jerusalem to enter Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.
- The Status Quo Agreement of the Holy Sites, which was ratified by the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, governs the relations between the different denominations.
- Bethlehem has been a destination for pilgrimage for at least 1500 years, with Christmas being considered the most celebrated religious festival worldwide.
- Upon the establishment of the Palestinian Government in 1994, projects such as Bethlehem 2000 aimed to develop the capacity of the city. During the Second *Intifada*, Bethlehem’s infrastructure was either destroyed or damaged by Israeli Occupying Forces, including a siege of the Church of the Nativity and placing military tanks in the Nativity Square for almost 40 days.
- Registration of the site as a World Heritage Site emphasized the call for its protection. Other sites require rehabilitations and development, but the listing of the Nativity Church in Palestine was the first step.
- The Birthplace of Jesus is not an event only revered by Christians. Islam also recognizes Jesus (as the “divined inspired prophet” called Issa, peace be upon him²). Both Muslims and Christians, living together in Palestine for the past 14 centuries, have protected this holy site among others, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

Palestine, Land of Olives and Vines: Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir³.

- Located in the Western Bethlehem Governorate, 7 kilometers south of Jerusalem, spreading from Wadi Al Makhrou (in Beit Jala) to the village of Husan, going around the village of Battir.
- The landscape is characterized by agricultural terraces, water springs, ancient irrigation systems, and agrarian watch towers, as well as olive presses, among other elements.
- The lands of the area have been cultivated for about 4000 years. It was historically considered as the “agricultural basin” of Jerusalem, due to its water springs. The system of irrigated terraces represents, as highlighted by the submitted document to UNESCO, “an outstanding example of technological expertise, which constitutes an integral part of the cultural landscape.”⁴
- The “buffer zone” of the site includes the villages of Al Walajah (north), Beit Jala and Al Khader (east) as well as the Husan (south).

2 For more information, please consult the Executive Summary of the 2012 nomination available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1433/documents/> last accessed on November 25, 2018.

3 For more information, please consult the Executive Summary of the 2014 nomination available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1492/documents/> last accessed on November 25, 2018.

4 Decision: 38 COM 8B.4 “Nominations to be processed on an emergency basis: Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir”, available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/6089> last accessed on December 2.

- An essential element of the site is the fact that part of its natural expansion is located beyond the 1967 border (in Israel proper), lands that are still irrigated with ancient pools and canals by their legitimate owners in accordance to an agreement reached between Israel and Jordan in the context of the Armistice Agreement of 1949.
- In addition to its archeological and agricultural richness, the valley was also used to connect the western area of Bethlehem with the city, including the destroyed Palestinian villages during the *Nakba* of 1948.
- Israeli colonial-settlement activity since 1967 has threatened by the path of the Israeli Annexation Wall and the construction of a bypass road for settlers (Road 60), whereby significant parts of the site and its buffer zone have been damaged. This includes the so-called Tunnels Checkpoint.
- In October 2018, the Israeli occupying authorities approved the expansion of Road 60 over Palestinian lands, which forces further destruction of the Battir/Makhroun area for the benefit of Israel's colonial-settlement enterprise. The planned Israeli measures would include building an additional bridge in the nearby site of Cremisan that would further affect Palestinian olive groves in the area.

Palestine's Denied Potential⁵

Tourism is one of the most negatively affected sectors through Israel's annexation policies and its colonial-settlement plans in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Some of the most critical consequences for Palestinian tourism include:

- **Restriction of Movement:** In violation of the Paris Protocol, Israel prevents the freedom of movement for tourism-related officers, including tour guides and buses. To date, only 40 Palestinians have permits allowing them to conduct tours in occupied East Jerusalem, as well as in Israel.
- **Limited Control over Tourism Resources:** Israel prevents the Palestinian Government from operating in over 60% of the occupied West Bank, where the occupying power continues to exploit numerous historical, religious, and archeological treasures. This includes not only a list of Israeli-listed "national parks" located in occupied territory, such as the Herodion Mountain in Bethlehem, but also other sites such as the Jordan Valley and Latroun, in addition to East Jerusalem.
- **Sizeable Leakages over Tourism Revenues:** Palestine suffers from considerable leakage in tourism revenue, with Bethlehem being the most evident example. While the city continues to receive millions of visitors, a significant percentage spend no more than a few hours in the city. Palestinian sites eventually end up being simple additions to Israeli tours that in some cases would include visits to colonial-settlements, instead of spending enough time to get to know the places, and the people, of Palestine. Such visits are promoted with misinformation by Israeli tour operators. Tourists are made to feel that they are under direct threat by the local Palestinian population and should thus spend as little time as possible at the site.

⁵ You can find more examples in the publication «The Annexation of Tourism: Israel's Policies and Their Devastating Impact on Palestinian Tourism» available at <https://www.nad.ps/en/publication-resources/publication/annexation-tourism> last accessed on November 25, 2018.

- **Destruction of Palestinian Cultural Heritage:** Israel has destroyed, damaged, and even stolen Palestinian objects and artifacts. This includes the damage suffered by the Old Cities of Nablus and Bethlehem during the Second *Intifada*.

Israel's monopoly over tourism prevents visitors from being able to enjoy Palestine's heritage⁶

As Israel controls all border crossings, including air space, the vast majority of tourists and pilgrims visit the Holy Land in tours that limit as much as possible their interaction with Palestinians. As a consequence, there are significant places of pilgrimage and cultural landscape, among others that are missed or ignored by a large number of visitors. For example, the Burqin Church (in the Jenin Governorate), Saint Barbara's Church (and the ancient tradition of Saint Barbara's Day in Aboud, northwest Ramallah), or the Battir/Makhrour terraces, are not mentioned in the majority of the offered tours. On the other hand, Israel's tourism industry exploits Palestinian sites, such as the Dead Sea, Qumran and Rachel's Tomb/Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque. This includes utilizing Israeli hotels in occupied territory, as well as rooms and other hospitality services offered by Israeli-colonial settlements.

Some of the Heritage and Archeological Sites in Palestine that are not yet listed as World Heritage Sites:

- Ancient Jericho: Tell Al-Sultan – Jericho Governorate
- Mount Gerizim and the Samaritans – Nablus Governorate
- QUMRAN: Caves and Monastery of the Dead Sea Scrolls – Jericho Governorate
- El-Bariyah: wilderness with monasteries – Bethlehem Governorate
- Wadi Natuf and Shuqba Cave – Ramallah Governorate
- Old Town of Nablus and its environs – Nablus Governorate
- Tell Umm Amer – Gaza
- Throne Villages – Ramallah and Nablus Governorates
- Sebastia – Nablus Governorate
- Anthedon Harbour – Gaza
- Umm Al-Rihan Forest – Jenin Governorate
- Wadi Gaza Coastal Wetlands – Gaza
- Baptism Site "Eshria'a" (Al-Maghtas) – Jericho Governorate
- The Shepherds Field in Beit Sahour (there are two locations: one for the Roman Catholic Church and one for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate)
- Saint Nicholas Church in Beit Jala (it hosts the largest pre-Christmas celebration in Palestine, with the Saint Nicholas Parade on December 19th)
- Saint George's Monastery in Al Khader – Bethlehem Governorate.
- The Cremisan Valley – Bethlehem Governorate.

⁶ For more information, you can find more examples in the publication «Tourism as a Tool to Normalize Occupation: Israel's Exploitation of Palestinian Tourism and International Complicity,» available at <https://www.nad.ps/en/publication-resources/publications/israel's-exploitation-palestinian-tourism-and-international> last accessed on November 25, 2018.

- The Pools of King Salomon in Artas – Bethlehem Governorate. Mar Saba Monastery – Bethlehem Governorate.

Heritage and Archeological Sites that are under Full Israeli Control in the Bethlehem Governorate:

- Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque/Rachel's Tomb
- The Herodion Mountain
- The Dead Sea

Key Facts about Bethlehem Governorate:

- The population includes over 220,000 people including over 16,000 living in three refugee camps: Dheisheh, Aida and Beit Jibrin.
- The main cities and towns are Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, Doha, Al Khader, Battir and Al Obadiya.
- Bethlehem City is located 10 kilometers south of Jerusalem and has a population of about 32,000 people.
- The Palestinian government only exercises limited control over 13% of the Bethlehem Governorate. The rest is controlled either by Israeli Occupying Forces or illegal Israeli settlers.
- The Israeli settlements surround that the Holy City of Bethlehem from its four sides include: 18 illegal Israeli colonial-settlements across the Bethlehem Governorate with a population of over 130,000 settlers. This includes three settlements within the illegal Israeli-defined, expanded, and annexed "Jerusalem Municipality": Gilo, Giv'at Hamatos, and Har Homa.

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