

# Toward Decolonization in Tourism:

## Engaged Tourism and the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster

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In the context of the ongoing Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine, tourism has proven to be an important instrument in shaping images and imaginative geographies related to both Palestine and Israel. Consequently, the Palestinian reality has been widely erased from the Israeli-controlled tourism sector in historic Palestine. The Zionist settler colonial project has rendered Palestinians invisible not just by forcing them behind walls but also by coopting their food, crafts, and folklore or representing them as the eternal “other.” Correspondingly, tourism is a practice that normalizes these images and reorders and reshapes perceptions of people, places, and their relation to the world.<sup>1</sup> Research has documented how narratives in Israeli and Palestinian tours conflict as both sides present their version of the facts.<sup>2</sup> However, after participating on two very different tours in the Old City of Jerusalem, I began to think differently about the effect of these tours. Narratives are not just competing. They relate to each other according to the power imbalances between Palestinians and Israel, and are in fact deeply embedded in the ongoing colonial situation.

Sandeman’s New Jerusalem is an international company based in Germany that provides free daily tours in all major European cities and also in the Old City of Jerusalem, Jaffa and Tel Aviv.<sup>3</sup> In March 2014, I participated on the full day “holy city tour” and was guided around Jerusalem’s Old City with a group of international tourists. Kyle, our guide, was a Jewish-American man in his forties who had immigrated to Israel and now guided groups through the busy streets of the Old City.<sup>4</sup> The story he told us was focused on ancient history and biblical stories that

came to life through his tour. The contemporary social or political situation was largely omitted. While we were strolling through the Christian quarter, he explained that “in the Middle East, religion is what makes you part of a community. It is very different from the West. You can identify through religion. In the Middle East everybody speaks Arabic, so you cannot identify through language, so religion is a means to identify yourself.” His generalization about the Middle East clearly gave my fellow tourists a story they could relate to. It was a familiar a lens through which they could understand Jerusalem and the Middle East in general.

Later, I went on another tour of the Old City, this time with an independent Palestinian guide from Jerusalem. He did not have the guiding certificate from the Israeli government. The tour put Kyle’s story into perspective. Seeing the city through the eyes of a Palestinian guide exposed colonial and Orientalist narratives that had been normalized in the previous tour. Nasser explained why religious symbols were omnipresent in Palestinian neighborhoods. They are means of identification, not just of religious zeal (although there were exceptions), because Israel prohibited Palestinians to publicly display their national flag. Deprived of this specific means to visually identify themselves, Palestinians use religious markers to distinguish themselves from Jewish Israelis. Kyle’s story of religion was suddenly taken out of its confined colonial truth and confronted with the political reality on the ground. What people such as my first guide recognized to be inherent qualities of the people of the Middle East are actually cultivated in power relations of colonialism and oppression. Nasser’s tour did more than oppose the Israeli colonial discourse, it pierced through Western, Orientalized categorizations. Story by story, he reordered the world in an anti-colonial image and called into question what tourists perceived as normal.

Kyle and Nasser’s stories are not coincidental; rather, they give us a glimpse of how tourism is intertwined with political processes, claims, and goals. Historically, tourism has been strongly embedded in colonial practices.<sup>5</sup> Holidaymaking and traveling have been used as propaganda tools to justify colonization and spread truths about colonizer and colonized.<sup>6</sup> We can therefore understand tourism as an instrument to convey and affirm narratives and images that remake people, places, and pasts in a politicized way.<sup>7</sup> Stories and images intended for tourists are often one-dimensional. They describe places in a ways that do no justice to their richness and complexity, for example by portraying Jerusalem as a site from biblical times. In this way, places and people are forced into a straightjacket, a tight script with which to comply.<sup>8</sup> Tourism is thus a business in which othering, essentializing, and myth creation are central to the production of its commodities.<sup>9</sup>

Adopting a postcolonial perspective, this paper positions tourism as an entry point to study the practicalities of settler colonialism in Palestine that is not confined in the Israeli-controlled borders but is sustained and its ideology spread on a global scale, as experienced in the Sandeman’s tour. However, learning from Nasser’s tour in the Old City, this paper also aims to raise the possibility of an emancipatory, anticolonial form of tourism. Through an explorative case study of the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster (JTC), it examines tourism’s potential in countering and exposing hegemonic images and practices

generated by Zionism in historic Palestine that also tap into wider Orientalist tropes. The case study that follows is based on fieldwork conducted in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Israel, throughout 2014 and 2015. It consists of participant observation in tours and in-depth interviews with guides and other tourism workers, particularly those connected to the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster.

## **Tourism and Settler Colonialism**

Tourism has played, and still plays, an important role in the colonization of Palestine by the Zionist movement. It became a decisive tool in demonstrating the success of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine and the achievements of the Jewish immigrants in Palestine. Most of the travel industry in the early 1900s was dominated by Arab guides and middlemen, who worked with international travel agencies such as Thomas Cook & Son.<sup>10</sup> Itineraries were designed to attract wealthy European and American travelers and focused mainly on ancient archeology and Christian and Muslim sites of importance.<sup>11</sup> Displeased with this situation, Zionist organizations tried to gain control over the tourism sector in order to create a platform on which to transform the Arab image of Palestine into a Jewish-oriented one.<sup>12</sup> The Zionist Information Bureau, founded in 1925, embarked on a campaign to reimagine and reorder Palestine into the future Jewish state. In 1932, the bureau pressured Thomas Cook & Son and other tour operators to start contracting Jewish hotels, drivers, and guides in order to support the Zionist cause in Palestine.<sup>13</sup> The bureau developed new routes and guidebooks that focused solely on the achievements of Zionist migrants: visits to kibbutzim, Jewish factories, farms, and so on. In this way the Zionist organizations aimed to attract new investments from diaspora Jews and non-Jewish supporters of the Zionist cause, and at the same time to motivate Jewish tourists to stay in “Eretz Israel” after their visit.

Through the production of brochures, maps, and guidebooks, Zionist organizations such as the Zionist Information Bureau, the department of trade and industry of the Zionist Executive, and the Association of Jewish guides were essentially normalizing the presence of Jewish settlers in Palestine.<sup>14</sup> This effort to “indigenize” the settler population, an important characteristic of settler colonial projects, manifested in the co-option of indigenous cultural artifacts and practices.<sup>15</sup> In tourism, these practices of appropriation become visible and tangible. One only has to take a walk by the gift shops in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City to see the typical Hebron glass, Bethlehem olivewood carvings, or Palestinian embroidery being sold as Israeli souvenirs. In her work, Rebecca L. Stein observed that this kind of consumption of Arab food and culture happens in a denationalized manner, devoid of any Palestinian reference.<sup>16</sup> This way indigeneity can be controlled, disempowered, and appropriated. The same accounts for spaces. The city of Jaffa, for example, has become a popular destination in Israeli and international tourism. LeVine describes how the Israeli government promotes and presents Jaffa as a “typical Middle Eastern city, this however was only possible after most of its Arab population was violently forced out.”<sup>17</sup> The touristic consumption of Arab space in Israel entails the

silencing of the history of violence inherent to the settler colonial project.

Through and within tourism, Palestinian presence is erased, silenced, or othered. This accounts for both Israeli and Palestinian tours. Jackie Feldman's work illustrates how Palestinian shop owners in the Old City of Jerusalem are depicted by Israeli tour guides. They refer to them as the people from biblical times, unchanged and primitive.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively Israeli guides sometimes portray Palestinians as dangerous terrorists or unreliable crooks with whom not to talk and from whom not to buy.<sup>19</sup> Silencing not only occurs in Israeli-led tours. Palestinian guides who are licensed by the Israeli government, or have a permit to guide in Israel, often defer from talking about politics, oppression, or the Palestinian cause, out of fear of losing their jobs.<sup>20</sup> Others do the same simply because the political story is not what tourists want to hear, not part of what they are able to sell. Consequently, some Palestinian tour operators prefer to market packages to the "holy land" instead of "Palestine," because it sounds less "dangerous" or "political" and is better known amongst tourists and pilgrims.<sup>21</sup>

Lastly, in the context of settler colonialism, tourism is an excellent platform to attract new settlers to the land. The contemporary Taglit or Birthright tourism to Israel is a telling example. Young Jewish people from all over the world are invited for a well orchestrated and funded ten-day tour provided by Israel. It gives an exclusively Zionist reading of the places visited, reflected both in what its groups get to see and what remains invisible to them. Essentially, the enjoyment and fun of travel is dependent on young people shutting their eyes to the injustice of Israel's colonialism.<sup>22</sup> The power of these tours is thus centered in the seemingly apolitical character of enjoying oneself. Moreover, these tours tend to strengthen the bond between Jewish people abroad and Israel to such an extent that we could speak of long-distance nationalism.<sup>23</sup>

Tourism as such is thus intrinsically implicated in the settler colonial complex: dispossession not only happens through violence but also through contingent touristic practices that erase Palestinian histories, cultural attributes, architecture, and so on. Through tourism, particular truths and claims are circulated, to create an order that serves Zionism's project of settler colonialism in historic Palestine.

## **Anti-Colonial Opportunities in Engaged Tourism**

Tourism offers a window on the practicalities of settler colonialism and how its logic is enacted through sightseeing, souvenirs, and fun. It opens a new space to study uneven power relations and oppression. Various authors, however, have encouraged us to think beyond tourism's hegemonic embeddedness and see it as a potential force of emancipation.<sup>24</sup> Adrian Franklin's work has been particularly salient in addressing the question of how tourism works. Franklin understands tourism as an "ordering force," a means by which the social reality can be reordered.<sup>25</sup> Ordering is characterized by multiplicity and this implies that tourism does not just work to the benefit of the powerful, but in various ways.<sup>26</sup> As Hazel Tucker and John Akama point out, the colonized can subvert histories of colonization and continuous domination through the performance

of tourism.<sup>27</sup> The subaltern can use tourism as a way to represent themselves as opposed to dominant colonial or Orientalized depictions of them.<sup>28</sup>

There is a growing movement among Palestinians to use tourism to generate a better understanding of the colonial situation in Palestine. Tourism represented only a marginal 4 percent of the gross domestic product of the occupied Palestinian territories (including East Jerusalem) in 2012, employing around 23 thousand people, mostly in the touristic hubs of Bethlehem and Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> Within this, alternative tourism represents only a minor fraction of the tourism industry. Nevertheless, more and more tour operators and individual guides are engaging in this kind of tourism. Practitioners in Palestine have been describing this tourism in various ways: alternative tourism, community based tourism, justice tourism, or political tourism. Rami Kassis, the director of the Alternative Tourism Group in Bayt Sahur, Palestine, defines “alternative tourism” as “all tourism that is not controlled by Israeli companies.” Summing up different elements of alternative tourism, Kassis emphasizes that this tourism has in common an active engagement with Palestine. For him this engagement blurs common distinctions between “locals and visitors,” creating a dynamic in which tourism becomes almost “informal.”<sup>30</sup>

During interviews, several respondents agreed to this conceptualization of tourism but objected to using the term “alternative tourism.” They argued that “alternative tourism” evokes the idea of a Palestinian tourism that is alternative to the Israeli tourism. They emphasized that Palestinians are not to be considered the “alternative,” because they are the native inhabitants of the land. One guide put it this way: “some people don’t like ‘alternative tours,’ because they say: we are the original, as Palestinians we are not alternative. But it is attractive to the internationals, [so] we have to keep it. [There is] a big discussion about it.”<sup>31</sup> For the sake of going beyond the semantics of “alternative tourism,” I prefer to call them “engaged tours or tourism.” I aim to point to all forms of tourism in which practitioners manifest the Palestinian presence in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Israel, normalize them as the native populations, and make Palestinian culture and heritage visible.

## **The Jerusalem Tourism Cluster**

The Jerusalem Tourism Cluster is one of the organizations promoting an engaged tourism that puts Palestinian, and more specifically Jerusalemite, culture front and center in the creation of touristic products. They are not the only ones working toward this re-ordering; other organizations (for example, the Alternative Tourism Group, the Siraj Center, and Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil) have a similar approach. However, the JTC is an umbrella organization that is concerned with the development of tourism in Jerusalem specifically. The cluster started operating in 2009, aiming to bring together partners from the tourism industry and socio-cultural organizations in order to create new touristic products that aim to more “accurately” portray Jerusalem and its Palestinian inhabitants.

According to the JTC, “there is no tourism in Jerusalem, only pilgrims. Essentially there are not enough activities to attract people, the packages don’t reflect diversity and



Figure 1: Tourism booth or electronic concierge of the JTC, on which tourists can discover East Jerusalem and find touristic facilities provided by Palestinians (photo courtesy of JTC).

Jerusalem is not a destination but a station [on the touristic routes].”<sup>32</sup> To address this perceived problem, the JTC started developing new touristic programs that sought to change tourism in the city in such a way that the Palestinian population could benefit from it. In the process, JTC brought into being objects and narratives that not only undermine the Israeli hegemony, but also aim to reorder the social touristic reality in Jerusalem and beyond, producing new representations and truths about Palestine and Palestinians. In what follows, I will question how practices that are constitutive to tourism also redefine or shape perceptions of identity, culture, or heritage.<sup>33</sup>

### *Touristic Infrastructure*

Given the Israeli control over infrastructure and public spaces in Jerusalem, it is very difficult for Palestinians to develop the city in their own image, including through the construction of hotels, restaurants, or other touristic infrastructure. The Israeli authorities rarely grant building permits to Palestinians. Consequently one of the spheres in which the JTC tries to maneuver around these restrictions is what they call “tourism’s soft infrastructure.” This mainly covers touristic services, products, and activities and also branding the city as a Palestinian destination.<sup>34</sup> The cluster does

so in different ways. One of their initiatives is the Web site [enjoyjerusalem.com](http://enjoyjerusalem.com) and the accompanying mobile application. The medium brings Palestinian businesses and sites of potential interest to the tourist’s attention. The Web site mentions both Christian and Muslim sites in the Old City, but omits the Jewish ones. This, according to the director, is still too sensitive. Promoting guides through the Web site is also problematic, as many Palestinian guides, especially those doing political tours, operate without an Israeli license. They fear exposure to and punishment from Israeli authorities by being posted as a guide on the Web, because the Israeli government only allows licensed guides to operate in Israel and East Jerusalem. This was also confirmed in interviews with unlicensed Palestinian

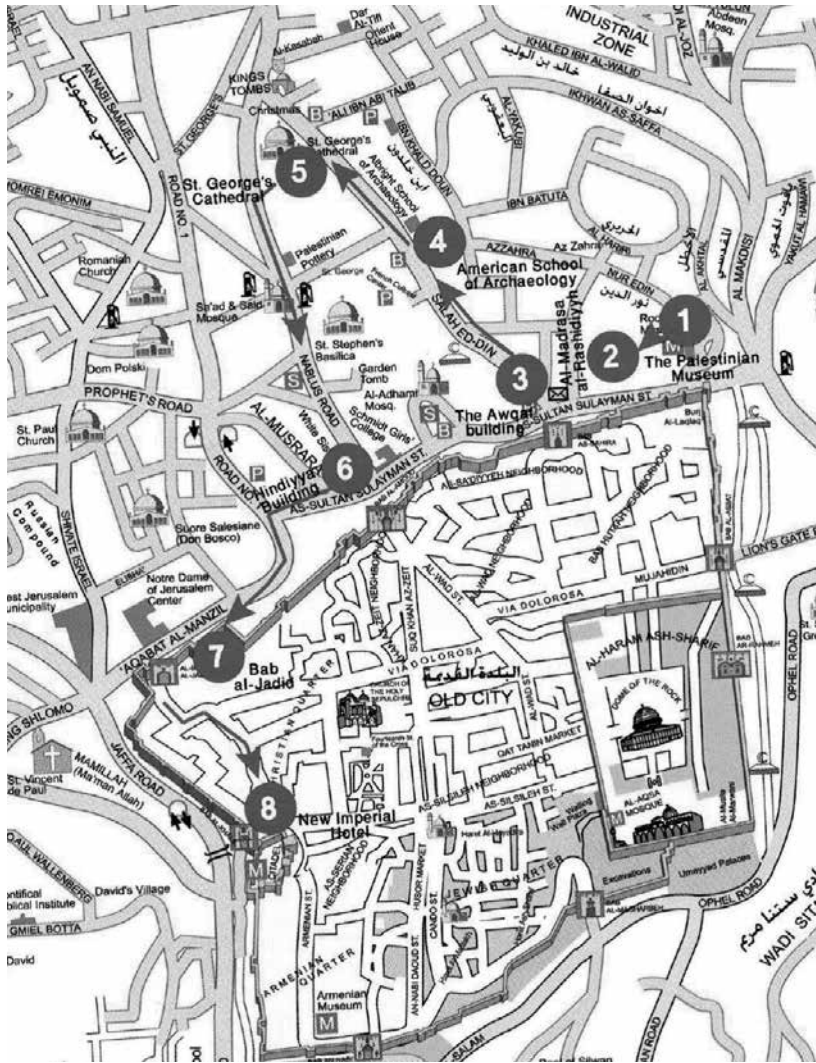


Figure 2: Map of the Mosaic architecture trail leading the tourist into the Palestinian neighborhoods outside the Old City of Jerusalem (photo courtesy of JTC). Source: Yusuf Said al-Natsheh, *Discovering Jerusalem's Secrets: Walking Trails through the Old City and Beyond* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Tourism Cluster, 2015).

guides who explained that they mostly promote their services by word of mouth to avoid getting in trouble with the Israeli authorities.<sup>35</sup>

The JTC's electronic concierge, or tourism booth, constitutes another component in this soft infrastructure. The booth offers tourist information about sites of interest, restaurants, and bars in East Jerusalem. Together with JTC-produced brochures, the booth is an alternative to Israeli brochures and maps that can often be found in Palestinian hotels, as a result of the lack of other information supplies. In the future, the JTC also plans to organize daily tours. The booth, tours, and brochures all aim to bring neglected Palestinian neighborhoods outside the Old City to the tourist's attention.

In terms of tangible infrastructure, the JTC tries to work in "public-private spaces." A clear example here is their plan to install explanation tags, digital codes, or route

indicators on buildings in East Jerusalem. Being required to ask for official Israeli permits to place these tags in public spaces and realistically expecting refusal, the JTC is looking for private spaces that are also accessible to the public, such as the façades of shops owned by Palestinians.<sup>36</sup> In this manner, they can make the city intelligible to tourists by giving explanations about historic or recent names, stories, and myths connected to specific buildings and places. Insights that give a Palestinian reading of the city unsettle the Zionist narrative. The JTC also sees these public-private spaces as a way to generate a local ownership over the touristic routes and sights in the city by connect them to the Palestinians living there, such as souvenir shop owners. The use of public-private space and soft infrastructure are ways to navigate within the settler colonial structures, avoiding the need to apply for Israeli permits that are unlikely to be provided. It manifests the Palestinian presence in the city and allows for a reclaiming of a Palestinian right to the city. Another example is the Go Bazark! art walk developed by the art institute al Hoash in cooperation with the JTC.<sup>37</sup> This walk is inspired by the global trend of tours that aims to “bring back life, enthusiasm and encouragement to marginalized areas through the use of art.”<sup>38</sup> The walk introduces people to forgotten places in and around the Old City of Jerusalem. Art works and music are displaced in these public-private spaces, and by doing so the Palestinian presence is manifested and made visible to tourists, both international and domestic, in an unexpected and creative way.

### *Coproducing Identity and Culture*

The Jerusalem Tourism Cluster puts significant emphasis on the diversity of Palestinian society, in the Old City of Jerusalem in particular. This is reflected in new products they have developed and propose to both conventional and “alternative” tour operators. A telling example is a tour of the different communities of the Old City, intended, as our guide explained, to “show not religious sites but the beauty and diversity of the city.” Normally, the JTC does not provide tours but this one was organized for a group of Palestinian journalists, and I was able to join. The tour did not lead us to the main religious sites, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; instead we got to observe the church from the roof of the neighboring Salah al-Din mosque, where we chatted with the woman who manages the site. Our group also met with members of the Assyrian and African community and passed by the Afghan and Indian community centers as we strolled through the alleys of the Old City. Continuing the tour, we met a family whose house was gradually being taken over by Jewish settlers, room by room. The format of the tour allowed for the tourists to interact and get to know the diverse communities and people living in the Old City and experience the complexities of their everyday lives, entrenched in politics. The tour also offered a platform for people that are otherwise left aside and not heard in the mainstream touristic itineraries. According to the JTC, this kind of firsthand information from the local inhabitants is vital to avoid propaganda in tours: on the one hand tourists then get to know the lived realities in the city, on the other it makes the tours more embedded in the community.<sup>39</sup>



These encounters gave us impressions of the heterogeneous Palestinian communities living in the Old City. They allowed for people to represent themselves and for the tourist to get a more nuanced understanding of the Old City. In displaying diversity as a central characteristic of Palestinian identity and culture in Jerusalem, the JTC wants to break with representation of Palestinians as only Muslims or Christians. One guide affiliated with the JTC also confirmed that “showing this diversity is a defense to what Israel is doing.”<sup>40</sup> At the same time, this diversity is key to the touristic potential of Jerusalem, as the director explained: “this is a very unique mix and this can be marketed as the city of everyone.” However, he also recognizes the risk in capitalizing on this representation: “the Israelis can use this as [if to say,] ‘okay, there is not any Palestinian here, you are all from small communities, here and there,’ which is not the original truth.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the JTC guides try to emphasize the connectedness of these communities and their common identity as Palestinians.

Other features designed by the JTC have a similar purpose. A new guidebook, recently published in both Arabic and English, leads tourists along new paths in the Old City.<sup>42</sup> The tours focus on themes such as women’s architecture, Sufi institutions and religious schools, mosaics, or the Hammam al-‘Ayn, which was closed down by the Israeli authorities. By means of regulation, destruction, or archeological fraud Israel has deprived Palestinian Jerusalemites of much of their heritage.<sup>43</sup> The JTC’s routes lead tourists away from the beaten path in the Old City and offer new ways of knowing the city that correspond with how the JTC wants Palestinians in Jerusalem to be experienced by tourists: as a diverse and open society. Consequently they shed a new light on the often-neglected remaining Palestinian sites in the city, using new elements to present Palestinian identity and culture to tourists from a Palestinian perspective – one that counters the colonial or Orientalist stereotype.

For the JTC, the importance of culture in tourism cannot be underestimated, as one of the staff explained “cultural tourism is the only option to compete with the Israeli’s. I can sell culture, they can’t sell my culture. They try to take falafel and hummus, but still it’s my culture.” He also emphasized that Palestinians “need to work in developing and showing our culture for national reasons.” The creation of new tourist products thus becomes intertwined with Palestinian political aspirations. An example here is the folkloric show called “Jerusalem Wonder Chart” that the JTC developed together with the cultural organization Sabreen. The JTC and Sabreen see it as a way to represent Palestinian culture in their own, correct, way, as opposed to Israelis who have also created shows in which dabka, a traditional Palestinian dance, is performed. Concerning this show, he said:

the Israelis . . . used to show the Palestinians as these silly, stupid people. We used to look very, very bad, the Arabic culture. They do not ignore us, they put us in their show, but they put us with wearing these gowns and looking very funny, like animals. We are people that were here six thousand years, we have very big, deep culture. We know how to reflect it and we are going to reflect it in this show.<sup>44</sup>

The show is a way to acquaint tourists with the dabka, but it aims to do much more. It seeks to become a platform from which Palestinians can reclaim their culture, presenting it in a decolonized way, as opposed to a performance of culture in which the lens of the colonizer is imposed.

### *From Engaged Tourism to Resistance*

With the diverse initiatives mentioned above, the JTC wants to create “a local culture of tourism,” “a culture of hosting tourists” in Jerusalem. The only way they see this working is through community-based and cultural tourism. According to the JTC, creating an emotional link between the host community and the visitor is vital to generate appreciation from both the visitor and the local community, which in turn would lead to the protection of sites, nature, objects, and so on.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, they want to promote tourism that is directed from within the community and not driven by business interests alone, as a way to “restore the centrality of tourism in Jerusalem” and “reclaim the city from a touristic perspective, not just [as an] industry but in terms of development.”<sup>46</sup> In this respect, the tours, brochures, Web sites, or guidebooks are designed to empower the community and create a “tourism that speaks the Palestinian story and gets the Palestinian idea.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the JTC emphasizes that this kind of touristic products can be realized in cooperation with the local communities, as they have vital, dormant assets that can be capitalized by integrating them into the touristic market.

Opting for cultural, community-based tourism is a deliberate business choice as well as a political one. The JTC does so in contrast to what they perceive to be business as usual in Palestine. According to a JTC respondent,

the tour operators for the past three thousand years have not done much research and development and they always do copy from the Israelis. At least we are providing them with alternatives, with differentiated packages, with programs, we are taking them into another world, we are starting to create tourism in Palestine.<sup>48</sup>

With the new, mostly cultural touristic products, the JTC want to expand pilgrimage, and make packages that are designed to experience Palestinian culture and heritage. They are thus also trying to recreate Palestine as a competitive brand that can be sold by tour operator or individual guides. These agents can become vital nodes in the reordering process that the JTC is engaged in. Besides opening up a new niche tourism market in Jerusalem, it is also explicitly linked to resisting the occupation in Jerusalem. As the JTC chairman put it: “in community based tourism we say, heritage is identity and identity is existence and existence is resistance.”<sup>49</sup> What became clear throughout the conversations with those involved in the JTC is that, to them, presenting the existence and the identity of Palestinians in Jerusalem is a vital aspect to decolonizing tourism and creating an engaged form of tourism in which the voices of Palestinian “everyday life” can be heard. Adding these stories into the touristic repertoires and routes indicates a normalization

of Palestinian narratives and images of Jerusalem. This in turn shows how tourism can reorder people's understanding of the city and open their eyes to a decolonized experience that confronts the settler colonial complex.

## Conclusion

This article took tourism as an entry point to lean about the practical dynamics of settler colonialism and resistance against it. From the start of Zionist colonization, tourism has been utilized to affect people's perception about the land and its people. This process continues today. It has helped reorder Palestine into the Jewish homeland, erasing stories of colonial violence and oppression from its itineraries and selling imaginative geographies that normalize the presence of Jewish settlers in the land. However, the explorative case study of the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster shows us that these touristic characteristics can be turned around and put to work in an anti-colonial project. As such, tourism can take people "into another world,"<sup>50</sup> dissolving colonially constructed categories as they create new touristic products that integrate Palestinian narratives and lived realities. But there is more at stake: the narratives they display are not just competing with the Israeli narratives in the touristic arena that Jerusalem has become. They uncover the power relations that are at stake in touristic places and activities. In this way, tourism contributes to a decolonized knowledge production. At the same time, these products highlight particular aspects of Palestinian life and reshape the way identity is perceived and thought of. The JTC capitalized on diversity and cultural richness of Jerusalem to rebrand the city. Tourism practices enact this knowledge about Jerusalem and its inhabitants and hence alter the social reality in which tourism takes place.

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### Endnotes

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