

MONOPOLIZING THE SITES

THE POLITICS OF TOURISM IN THE OCCUPIED SYRIAN GOLAN



Al-Marsad

ARAB HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE
IN GOLAN HEIGHTS

The Politics of Tourism in the Occupied Syrian Golan

By Brónagh Carvill

On a sunny day in the occupied Syrian Golan, swarms of tourists can be found on top of Mount Bental (known as Tal Ala'ram in Arabic). At this dormant Israeli military base - now a major tourist attraction - coach loads of tourists arrive to explore Israeli bunkers, drink refreshments at the 'Coffee Anan' café and take in spectacular views of the lush valleys of Israel, Syria and Jordan. And - more recently - they come to watch the fighting from the Syrian war taking place across the fortified ceasefire line fence a short distance away, which separates the Golan from the rest of Syria.

A recording set to rousing patriotic music describes how Israel 'began to settle the Golan' following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Today roughly 27,000 Israeli settlers live in 34 illegal settlements in the region.^[1] The recording does not, however, mention the word 'occupation', or the fact that Israel's invasion resulted in the forcible transfer or displacement of 130,000 people (95% of the native Syrian population) and the systematic destruction of 340 Syrian farms and villages by the Israeli army.^[2] Instead, it boasts that a 'host of activities awaits the whole family' in the region's settlements, such as 'self-picking a variety of fruits' and visits to the Golan Winery, which has 'earned international fame for its fine



wines.'^[3] And so the Israeli narrative remains unchallenged and the average tourist continues on his/her journey, blissfully ignorant of the reality of Israel's occupation of the Golan.

Tourism represents a major part of the Golan's settlement economy. The Golan has long been promoted as a tourist destination by the Israeli government and tourism industry, which market it as 'Northern Israel' - even referring to it as the 'Israeli Texas' due to its relative size.^[4] Over two million tourists visit the Golan each year^[5], and 10.9% of all international tourists in Israel stayed in the region in 2017.^[6] These statistics reflect the growth of the wider Israeli tourism industry. Approximately 3.6 million tourists entered Israel in 2017, an increase of 25% in comparison to 2016 and an 'all time

high in tourism in Israel'.^[7] The total revenue from incoming tourism for 2017 is estimated at \$5.8 billion^[8], and accounted for 2.6% of Israel's GDP.^[9]

This success can, in large part, be attributed to the Israel's Ministry of Tourism, which has adopted a 'multi-million dollar marketing program focused on creating demand for the Israel destination'.^[10] However, this economic initiative must be examined through a political lens. The Israeli Ministry of Tourism's support of the settlement tourism industry serves to create new 'facts on the ground', i.e. illegal settlement expansion, and legitimise the occupation of the Golan. Meanwhile, the severe lack of tourism infrastructure and/or industry in the remaining five native Syrian villages of the Golan is illustrative of the discriminatory nature of Israel's policies in the area. Finally, the complicity of international corporations, along with the complacency of foreign governments, facilitates widespread violations of human rights and humanitarian law in this occupied territory.

I. Settlement tourism; facilitating a normalisation of the occupation

Since the occupation began, the Israeli government has actively encouraged and

financially supported the relocation of Jewish-Israeli settlers to the Golan. In recent years, Israeli government ministers have repeatedly called for 100,000 new settlers to move to the Golan.^[11] In October 2016, the Israeli Finance Ministry approved the construction of 1600 new settlement units in Katzrin settlement, the largest settlement in the Golan considered to be the 'settlement capital'.^[12] Settlement expansion is closely linked to the development of tourism infrastructure. Indeed, the Israeli Ministry of Tourism is currently implementing a plan 'for the economic and social empowerment of Katzrin settlement', which includes a significant investment in tourism facilities.^[13]

Israel's settlement policy in occupied territory is internationally recognised as a violation of the Fourth Geneva convention and an obstacle to lasting peace in the Middle East.^[14] The United Nations rejected Israel's annexation of the occupied Golan^[15] and has described its settlement construction as a 'form of colonialism of the kind declared to be a denial of fundamental human rights and contrary to the Charter of the United Nations...'^[16] However, these condemnations go unheeded by Israel as it seeks to strengthen its hold on this occupied territory. This aim is achieved through a variety of measures, such as the establishment and expansion of Israeli settlements; natural resource exploitation; and, the marginalisation of the native Syrian population through land appropriation and restrictions on the expansion of Syrian villages, unsecure residency status and 'Israelization' strategies, such as an imposed Israeli school



Above: Tourist signs in the Golan are only in Hebrew and English. Photograph sourced from the Al-Marsad archives.

curriculum that seeks to disregard and diminish Syrian and Arab identity and culture. Settlement tourism is being used as a means of legitimizing and normalising the occupation both inside Israeli society and internationally. Visitors flock to the Mount Hermon (Jabal Al-Shaikh in Arabic) ski resort and the neighbouring Neve Ativ settlement, ignorant of the fact that it is constructed on the ruins of the Syrian village Jubata al-Zeit, destroyed by the Israeli army to make way for the economic development of the mountain.^[17] They sample wine made from grapes grown on land appropriated from the local Syrian population. They pick fruit on settler farmland while Syrian farmers must pick their way around fields laced with landmines. The tourism industry in the Golan only portrays the Israeli narrative regarding the occupation, and thus tourists leave the Golan assured of the legitimacy of Israel's hold over the region.

This normalisation of the occupation is also facilitated by the complicity of international corporations. Israeli and multinational travel corporations exploit the emerging markets of digital tourism and online booking platforms to reap enormous profits in the occupied territories. The Israeli Ministry of Tourism has endorsed a trend towards independent online bookings by investing NIS 18.5 million (USD 5.8 million) in cooperation with major travel companies, such as Tripadvisor, Expedia and Odigeo Edreams.^[18]

Not only are these travel companies abetting Israel's violation of international law by extending their services to settlers and promoting accommodation and tourism activities in illegal settlements, but their

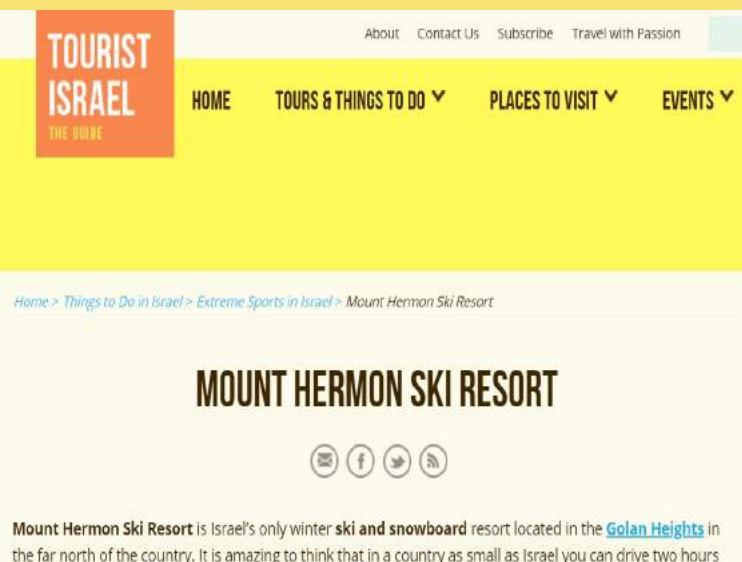
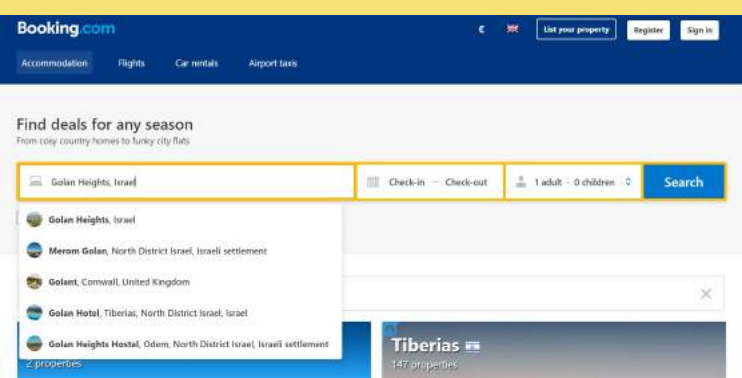
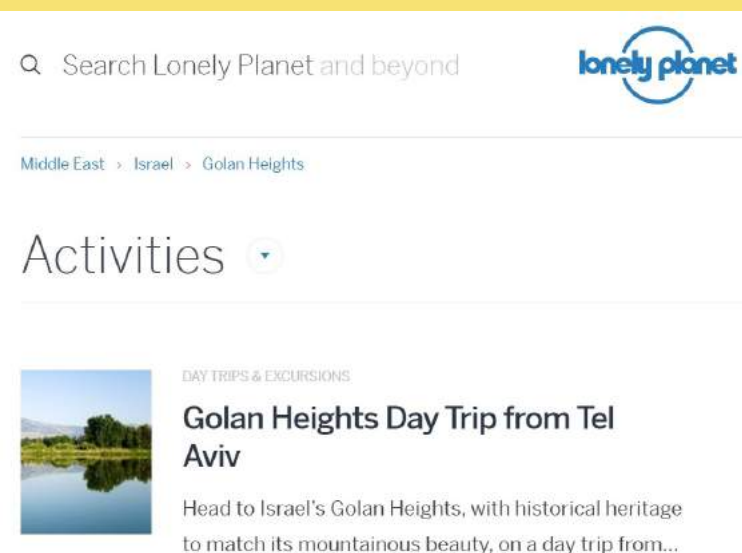
advertising practices follow the mislabelling of settlement products as 'Made in Israel'. By employing a strategy of misleading advertising, companies are violating basic principles of consumer protection laws^[19] in their pursuit of profit.^[20] International travel giants such as Lonely Planet and Booking.com categorize the Golan as being part of Israel, while Airbnb and Tripadvisor include listings for accommodation and activities in the Golan advertised as being in Israel.

At the time of publication, Airbnb and Tripadvisor are both advertising at least 130 properties in illegal Israeli settlements in the Golan; Booking.com 125 and Lonely Planet 80.

In addition, Lonely Planet and Tripadvisor are advertising tourism activities in illegal Israeli settlements. Suggested excursions include horse riding at the Ramot Ranch, 'one of the most famous horse ranches in Israel'^[21], and a visit to the Odem Mountain Winery, during which travellers should 'keep an eye out for this family-run boutique winery's light, summery rosé'.^[22]

As two of the most prominent advertisers of accommodation and activities in illegal Israeli settlements in the Golan, Al-Marsad has written to Booking.com and Lonely Planet to inform them that they are misrepresenting the Golan as part of Israel and are promoting accommodation and tourism activities in illegal Israeli settlements. Lonely Planet's response was disappointing and failed to acknowledge and address Al-Marsad's concerns.^[23] Booking.com did not respond.^[24]

Meanwhile, the international travel media



contributes to the misrepresentation and normalisation of the occupation: TimeOut magazine describes the Golan as a 'must-see' part of 'Northern Israel' and advises readers to

enjoy its 'tranquil parks, gardens, museums, galleries, [and] vineyards.'^[25] The Metro, the highest circulating newspaper in the United Kingdom, describes how travellers can drive 'two hours from the desert to a ski resort' in 'Israel's Golan Heights'.^[26]

II. Discriminatory policies; stunting the growth of the native Syrian tourism industry

Following the Israeli occupation of the Golan in 1967, only five Syrian villages remain in the Golan with a collective population of just over 27,000.^[27] The small size of the remaining Syrian population; its relative geographic isolation; multiple discriminatory policies affecting urban planning, investment, agriculture, to name but a few; and the conflict in Syria, have meant that the Syrian economy in the Golan is very small and vulnerable. The existence of the thriving settlement tourism industry depends on discriminatory Israeli policies which remove competition and distribute vital resources in an inequitable manner, further stunting the growth of the local Syrian economy.

First, the allocation of funds by the Ministry of Tourism is carried out in a highly discriminatory fashion. The annual budget of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism estimates that Israeli government investment in tourism for 2017 amounted to NIS 328 million (USD 90.6 million) in expenses, in addition to NIS 629 million (USD 172.7 million) allocated specifically to the 'development of the sector'.^[28] The Ministry promotes investment of capital in

Above (top): Screenshot of the Lonely Planet website describing the Golan as 'Israel's Golan Heights'. (Middle): Screenshot of the Booking.com website listing the Golan as 'Golan Heights, Israel' (Bottom): Screenshot of the Tourist Israel website describing Hermon Ski Resort as 'Israel's only winter and snowboard resort located in the Golan Heights'

the tourism industry, provides grants to projects in the hotel industry and collaborates with the largest international online travel agents in a bid to channel tourist movement into Israeli settlements and away from the Syrian villages in the Golan.

For example, the Israeli Ministry of Tourism has heavily subsidised the establishment of the Mount Hermon ski resort. According to an Israeli settler in Neve Ativ over a quarter of an Israeli government loan used by the settlement to develop the resort was from the Ministry of Tourism. The settlers did not purchase the land, instead they lease it rent free from the Israeli government.^[29] This is in addition to land received from the Jewish Agency.^[30]

To rub salt in the wound, Israeli settlers have used their control over Mount Hermon to discriminate against Syrian ski instructors who decided to work independently of the settlement. The instructors who set up Majdal Shams Ski School are required to pay for entry to the resort and for their ski pass, whilst instructors working for the settlement business do not have to bear these extra costs.^[31]

Defining settlements in occupied territories as



‘National Priority Regions’, the Israeli government encourages relocation to these areas by offering Jewish-Israelis incentives in the form of exemptions from local and government taxes, subsidised loans and special government grants. The Israeli government’s plan for the ‘economic and social empowerment of Katzrin settlement’ is yet another example of the financial support of illegal Israeli settlements. An Israeli government website states that NIS 2.5 million (USD 686 thousand) was allocated to ‘expand public exposure of Katzrin’. The Ministry of Tourism has made grants available for up to 24% of the costs for the establishment of tourist accommodations and up to 30% for the establishment of small tourism businesses. NIS 2 million (USD 549 thousand) has been allocated for agricultural tourism projects in Katzrin, and a budget is even outlined for a children’s educational programme in order to ‘expand employment opportunities [for] families with small children living in the community’.^[32]

While no expense is spared to facilitate the development of the Golan’s settlement tourism industry, the Israeli government totally neglects the native Syrian economy. Nadine Safedi, manager of the Narkis Boutique hotel in the Syrian village of Majdal Shams, says that Israeli government funding, which they applied for 9 years ago, was never granted.^[33] Additionally, Israel’s supported tourism program clearly favours Jewish-owned hotels to the detriment of Arab hotel-owners. For instance, the Ministry of Tourism offers monthly vouchers to military personnel and to veterans with disabilities. These vouchers may only be used in hotels owned by Jewish-Israeli settlers

Above: Israeli settlement Neve Ativ - a popular tourist stop off built on the ruins of the Syrian village of Jubatha Al-Zeit. Photograph sourced from the Al-Marsad archives.

and as a result, Arab hotel owners can access only a fraction of the business generated by their Jewish counterparts.^[34]

The most significant investment made by the Israeli government in the Syrian village of Majdal Shams came in the form of a 'renovation' of the main street in 2016. The street is linked to a road which connects the rest of the Golan to Mount Hermon. Therefore, businesses along the road were often frequented by travellers stopping on their way to or from the mountain. Syrian business owners and residents enthusiastically welcomed the news of this project, excited at the opportunity of boosting the local economy. Astonishingly, the renovation was carried out with no consideration for the dynamics of Majdal Shams and has actually succeeded in dramatically reducing the flow of tourists to the village. Nadine Safedi, manager of the Narkis hotel, remarks that the street is 'more beautiful' but 'there's no parking'.^[35] For Qasem Sabag, this lack of parking for potential tourists has resulted in a huge decrease in the profit generated by his restaurant, and in the collapse of his clothing shop. He laments that 'everyone is disappointed in the new project'. He added that the main street is now like a 'tunnel...towards the Hermon Mountain'.^[36]

According to Mazyad Abu Saleh, owner of the trendy 'Why Bar', the main street is 'worse than before' and has resulted in the closing of 'lots of businesses'.^[37] This botched renovation project represents the Israeli government's disinterest in the Syrian economy in the Golan and the lack of accountability of the local

councils in the Syrian villages. Further, this half-baked investment in Majdal Shams compared with the vast financial support and expertise afforded by the Israeli government to the Golan's illegal settlements is simply another example of the discrimination suffered by Syrians in the Golan.



Second, the imposition of discriminatory planning policies in the Golan severely restricts the expansion of its remaining Syrian villages. It is almost impossible for Syrians to acquire building permits, forcing them to build without permits in order to meet the housing and development needs of a growing population. Between 1983-2014, the Israeli authorities issued 1,570 home demolition orders to Syrians in the Golan, forcing people to pay substantial fines – sometimes over 20,000 USD - or serve prison sentences to avoid the destruction of their home.^[38] Between 2016 and 2017, the Israeli authorities enforced the full or partial demolition of 10 Syrian homes.^[39] The overcrowding in Syrian villages in the Golan is only set to worsen with the imminent development of the 'Hermon National Park' plan, under which the Israeli authorities are seeking to appropriate up to 82km² of land around the Syrian villages of Majdal Shams

and Ein Qynia.^[40] The designation of land as a 'national park', 'abandoned property' or for 'military or public needs' is an oft-used tactic to either prevent the expansion of Syrian and Palestinian communities under occupation, or to appropriate land for settlement construction.

The 2009 case of North District Planning and Construction Committee v. Goldfarb, Ashtar, Tobol and Gotmakar clearly illustrates the discriminatory nature of Israeli planning policies. In this case, the relevant Israeli Planning and Building Committee in the Golan challenged the construction of holiday rental cabins in the Nimrod settlement, as they had been built without the requisite planning permission. The settlers' defence was that the state encouraged them to build and develop in the settlement of Nimrod. They stated that they settled in the Golan with the knowledge and encouragement of the Golan Regional Council and the support of the Settlement Division of the World Zionist Organization. They also said that the state had supported them economically. The settlers ultimately won their case (and the appeal) on the basis that they had carried out the construction in accordance with 'Zionist settlement principles'.^[41]

This court decision is illustrative of inherent discrimination in urban planning against Syrians in the Golan. While Syrians risk demolition orders to build homes and cannot expand their villages, Israeli settlers are free to build without concern for consequences – even on the rare occasions when the Israeli government questions their action.

The tourism industry is also adversely affected by the broader facts of life under prolonged

occupation. For example, Israel's land appropriation and its discriminatory policies regarding water pricing and allocation^[42] means that the Syrians offering agricultural tourist activities such as fruit-picking cannot compete with their settler counterparts. Additionally, a landmine clearance program recently initiated by Israeli authorities in the Golan focuses on settlement areas over Syrian areas. The presence of these landmines (and the bright yellow warning signs which accompany them) acts as a deterrent to visitors and thus erode the potential of the local tourism industry.

Finally, Israel's continued occupation and the Golan's proximity to the Syrian conflict raging on the other side of the ceasefire line has meant that many countries – including those in Europe - have issued travel advice cautioning their citizens from visiting certain parts of the region.^[43] These travel advisories cover several Syrian villages, including Majdal Shams, the largest remaining Syrian village in the Golan. Travel advisories not only have the potential to deter visitors to these Syrian villages and the surrounding area for reasons of safety, but they also drive up the cost of travel insurance for tourists and visiting delegations to the area, thus providing yet another deterrent to visit.

The impact of all of these factors has been the entrenchment of discriminatory policies and manipulation of the Golan tourism industry. Israeli settlers, with direct funding and support from the Israeli government, create tourist opportunities and activities while Syrian villages that naturally possess tourist attractions are being intentionally neglected. This violates international and Israeli law as it facilitates the exploitation of the economy of an

occupied territory for the benefit of the occupier.^[44]

Additionally, these factors create deeper ethnic divides along socio-economic lines, with Israeli



settlers benefitting from investment and opportunity at the expense of the local Syrian population simply based on their ethnic background. This too violates international law in that it institutionalizes segregation and discrimination through the exploitation of occupied land. Discrimination on the basis of race and social origin are both unequivocally forbidden under international law in any circumstance, including during occupation.^[45]

III. Alternative tourism; challenging the Israeli narrative

The combination of a negative image of Palestine portrayed by much of the western media (supported by Israeli propaganda) and physical obstacles, such as the separation barrier and checkpoints, means that the vast majority of tourists to the region only see Palestinians through the 'window of a tour bus' when they visit Bethlehem.^[46] However, a new

breed of 'alternative tourist' has begun to visit Palestine – albeit in modest numbers – to see the situation with their own eyes and go beyond the mainstream tourist or pilgrim trips to the region.^[47]

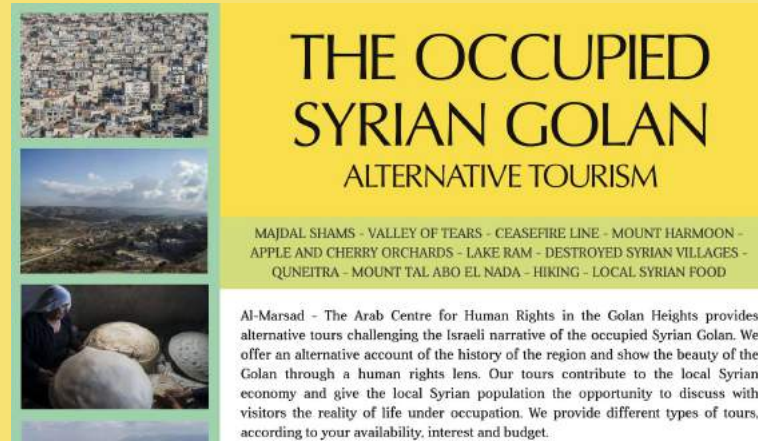
In response to the emergence of alternative tourism, many civil society organizations in Palestine and Israel offer tours that raise awareness about the consequences of life under Israeli military occupation. For example, a women's empowerment group in Bethlehem's Aida refugee camp runs a cooking class where participants learn to make basbussa while chatting with Palestinian women about their lives and the camp's conditions.^[48] Similarly, a group of whistleblower Israeli military veterans run 'Breaking the Silence' tours, in which they describe the military's 'deterioration of moral standards' and expose the reality of 'cases of abuse towards Palestinians' which have 'been the norm for years'.^[49]

Unfortunately, the Syrian villages of the Golan have yet to benefit from the growing popularity of alternative tourism. According to Hamoud Safedi, who runs a private travel agency in Majdal Shams, this lack of tourism can partially be attributed to the Israeli tourism industry's consistent portrayal of these villages as 'pro-Syrian' and therefore 'dangerous'. But, most significant is the fact that tourists 'forget that the Golan is occupied'.^[50] Marketed as 'Northern Israel' by both Israeli and international travel companies, many tourists simply do not realize that there are Syrians living under occupation in the Golan and

suffering from human rights violations similar to the abuses Palestinians face. Therefore, they do not seek to understand the situation of Syrians in the Golan while travelling in the region.

This paucity of alternative tourism in the Golan may also be caused by the fact that the few Syrians who do manage to break into the tourism industry are extremely reluctant to speak about the occupation and its consequences, for fear of scaring off potential Israeli customers and repercussions from the Israeli authorities.

However, some opportunities to learn more about the Golan's occupation do exist; local guides are pleased to show you Mount Hermon and its surrounding countryside, while Al-Marsad, building on its field tours program, has launched a tourism program to offer an alternative account of the history of the region and help support the local Syrian economy.^[51]



Alternative tourism in the Golan is an important means to challenge the artificial narratives provided not only by the Israeli government and pro-Israel organisations, but also by international travel companies, like Lonely Planet and Booking.com. However, in order to attract tourists, individuals and organisations must increase mainstream international awareness for the availability of their services.

This is a struggle that will be made even harder without change from international travel giants and the travel media. Until they recognize their responsibilities, many travellers to the region will continue to be misinformed about the Golan and the reality of Israel's occupation.

Endnotes

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FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information or to book an alternative tourism tour in the occupied Syrian Golan, please visit:

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