



Tourism, one practical advantage of an Israeli-Palestinian settlement

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Washington, DC - Recent sputtering of a peace process between Israel and Palestine, the termination of Israel's settlement building freeze causing a demise of said peace process - again - has produced a loud, global yawn. What else is new in this endless conflict? Negotiations cannot succeed without a vision, and there is no widely shared vision of peace among these people that could truly spur their politicians forward.

The hardest part of building peace for the future is freeing oneself from the wounds of the past that create brutal behaviour in the present. One way forward may be to suspend scepticism for just a moment, to free the mind to build a world of practical possibilities should peace be achieved. Armed with this imaginative exercise it might become easier to lobby for practical ways forward.

Let's imagine the following: the official creation of a state of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital, West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, a shared civil regime for the quarter mile of the Holy Basin in the Old City of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees awarded citizenship and compensation in a variety of countries including Palestine itself, and normalised relations between all Arab states and Israel.

The first thing to occur would be an explosion of religious tourism, venturing beyond boundaries to forbidden and exotic lands, places only grandparents saw with their own eyes. This would be true of Jews, Christians and Muslims, but especially of Middle Eastern families – Palestinian and Jewish – torn apart by decades of conflict. From the rest of the world there would be Muslim pilgrimages to the holiest and most ancient places in Syria, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and many other countries. Arab Jews from many of the 22 Arab states would be pilgrims in the opposite direction. They would visit the cemeteries of their grandparents and their saints, visit hundreds of villages that still exist, with their massive Israeli, French and American Jewish families in tow.

Dozens of companies will provide routes for Muslims to travel from places as far as Malaysia and China to Jerusalem and then on to Mecca, following in the footsteps of their prophet, and other companies will specialise in Jewish tours across the region. Highways, trains and hotels will multiply dramatically on the roads between Cairo, Gaza, Jerusalem, Haifa, Beirut and Damascus.

Tourism is the most democratic of all wealth producing industries, and millions of jobs will be created spanning all the religious communities, minorities and majorities alike.

With Jewish and Palestinian identities on more secure foundations, the search for the ancient Middle East below ground will be less politicised and reach new and more sophisticated levels of collaboration in the Holy Land, leading to a vast expansion of archaeological and academic research, also translating into many more jobs.

Business partnerships, already secretly there, will surface overnight between the Gulf States and Israelis, between Israel's high tech firms and a youthful Middle Eastern population eager for work. All these communities will rediscover only recently suppressed traditions of Arab Jews, Christians and Muslims trading and working together across the Middle East for centuries.

To cite an example of emerging patterns of cooperation, I am a co-founder of a Palestinian-Jewish social enterprise called MEJDI, Middle East Justice and Development Initiative. We are pioneering both tours and academic seminars to the Middle East and beyond, where we specialise in patronising small businesses with a reputation for fair wages. Profits are also re-invested in lecturers and tour guides who are reputable activists for positive social change.

This is just a small example of the intersection of small business empowerment and social change that cuts across enemy lines. But serious attention to fair wages and social justice should start now, and financial support for social change activists must occur now as a model for the future.

Imagination provides an exploration of what could be but it is not the road there. The road requires step by step increments of trust building, ways to convince more and more of these wounded peoples to reach out to neighbours and thereby to bring their politicians to honest negotiations, not devious games.

Generations of Arabs, Muslims, Christians and Jews did build prosperous relationships, even over centuries. It is time to recover their legacy. The key to the future is imagination with a conscience, and then all obstacles become smaller.

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