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## Frontier Internship in Mission

### **Drafting a code of ethics for tourists in Palestine**



*By Regula Kaufmann*

“THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND continues to deteriorate gradually, but without really affecting our daily lives in Beit Sahour. Due to the resumption of the payment of public servants’ salaries, the economic pressure in the West Bank has lessened. People feel better off. However, in the Gaza Strip, the situation has become even more difficult since June (when Hamas took full control of that region). Due to Israel’s restrictions on the importation of goods into the area, the economy has almost completely collapsed.

According to reports, the situation is close to a humanitarian disaster. Neither the Israeli government nor the new ‘government’ in Ramallah seems willing to change things substantially to bring relief to the people. Even worse, in September, the Israeli government declared the Gaza Strip a ‘hostile entity,’ paving the way for the adoption of more drastic collective punishment measures, such as further cutting electricity and fuel supplies. In the West Bank, settlement construction, wall construction, land confiscation, house demolitions, nightly raids, imprisonment, humiliation, and countless other measures of occupation continue to be carried out on a daily basis. This is the reality on the ground, the reality that is hidden from the international community which is fed ‘positive’ news. Israeli government statements say that ‘peace’ is possible within one year, if the US will be so kind as to help. At the same time, Israel’s foreign minister reaffirmed that security will always be more important than the creation of a Palestinian state, let alone a viable one. The world is expecting a miracle to happen at the Annapolis Conference. I dread that it will bring a loss of the last remaining Palestinian islands or that it will lead to a third Intifada.”

This is how Regula Kaufmann, a Frontier intern from Switzerland, succinctly and eloquently describes the context of her internship with the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) in Beit Sahour, Palestine. She may not be too far off. Referring to the Annapolis Conference, Nahum Barnea, one of Israel's best-known commentators, wrote that "anyone unfamiliar with the Middle East would be forgiven for thinking that Tuesday's ceremonies were marking the signing of a permanent peace." According to Barnea, nothing less than "a miracle would be required" for a Palestinian state to be brought into being by the end of 2008.<sup>1</sup>

At ATG, Regula's main task has been the further development of a project resulting from the Interfaith Cooperation for Justice in the Occupied Territories and Human Encounters for Peace and Reconciliation through Tourism workshop in Alexandria in 2005. The two core fields in which ATG wants to move forward are the development of a local perspective on ethical guidelines for pilgrims and tourists and local and international theological reflections on the concept of pilgrimage.

Early in 2007, Regula became involved in finishing an ongoing ATG project, updating the French edition of the guidebook *Palestine and Palestinians*. Regula was given the tasks of identifying and overseeing the last corrections and coordinating additional translation and editing. This gave her very valuable additional experiences and insights into Palestinian living and working conditions.

"Since the print shop for the book is located in Ramallah, the work involved frequent trips to the nearby political 'capital' of Palestine. These trips were not only educational in terms of what I learned from people and colleagues, but they also provided me with additional first-hand experience of the restrictions and humiliations that Palestinians are exposed to under Israeli occupation, such as waiting in traffic jams caused by flying checkpoints and other checkpoints, taking longer routes because of closed roads, being interrogated, witnessing verbal abuse at checkpoints, meeting the wall at unexpected places, being tossed around in buses on damaged roads, and seeing new parts of settlements."

### **Field Trips**

The Swiss Forum for Human Rights in Israel and Palestine organized a study trip to Israel and Palestine in the spring of 2007. The trip focused on the situation of internally displaced Palestinians living in Israel and the refugees of 1948 and 1967, living in the Palestinian territories, in neighboring countries, and throughout the world. ATG was given the opportunity to arrange part of the logistics; Regula was able to attend half of the program of the study trip.

"In addition to learning more about the plight of internally displaced people and refugees and the meaning of the right of return, I also had the opportunity to discuss our Pilgrimages for Transformation project with people and be stimulated by discussion of its importance, strengths, and weaknesses. This gave me further ideas and inputs for the project. Overall, the experience was enriching and provided me with new contacts in Switzerland, a greater understanding of the scope of the right of return, and firsthand experience of ATG's core work."

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrike Putz: "Israelis and Palestinians Pessimistic on Chances of Peace", *Der Spiegel*, November 28, 2007.

ATG has also undertaken field trips in order to strengthen its local network through direct contact with partners in other cities in the West Bank and to discuss new ideas and partnerships with them. The first field trip was a day trip to Nablus, less than a two hour drive away from Bethlehem, but rather difficult to access.

“It was a little adventure to go there with our office car and to meet people with whom most of us had only spoken to over the phone. From what I can observe, I believe that such events have a very positive impact on people. For a time, they could leave the ‘prison’ of the few square kilometers they have lived in for years,” asserted Regula.

In August, Regula accompanied a group visiting Palestine and Israel on a tour organized by a recently established NGO working out of Switzerland. The Initiative for Intercultural Learning (IFIL) offers trips to meet people in foreign countries and learn about their culture. The trips consist mainly of meetings with organizations, politicians, and people on the ground. “Their program was a good opportunity for me to be confronted with Israeli and Swiss Zionist narratives. A meeting in the Israeli Foreign Ministry was also part of the program. The participants were approximately 20 students and recent graduates from Switzerland, from both the German- and French-speaking parts. Although they had limited knowledge of the conflict before coming here, we managed to give them many learning opportunities and encourage this dynamic group to share their experiences. I believe that staying in host families in Beit Sahour and Bethlehem and experiencing the situation on the ground in Al-Walaje and Hebron, broadened their horizons in particular.”

### **Pilgrimages for Transformation**

Regarding the Pilgrimages for Transformation (PIFT) project, she notes that “it has progressed, thanks to the help of many people. Many factors have enabled us to start a new phase of the project. International partners have continuously encouraged us and helped us to develop the project and attract interest from new organizations. We were able to submit a new, readjusted, and more focused funding proposal to Karibu, an organization in Norway. At the beginning of June, we received confirmation that they are willing to support the project. This enabled us to go ahead with the idea of organizing a small international workshop and printing some material. In addition to writing proposals and submitting them, we also continued our consultations with other organizations. This helped us to spread the idea and gain interested local partners for further cooperation.”

A first workshop on tourism practices took place in October. It was opened by an introductory speech about tourism in Palestine by the Deputy Minister of Tourism and Antiquities, Mr. Marwan Toubassi. The workshop was attended by more than 80 people from all over Palestine (1967 and 1948, i.e. Israel) and aimed to bring together Palestinians who are involved in tourism in order to discuss the challenges that the Palestinian tourism sector currently faces. The participants were divided into working groups and invited to share their opinions and identify problems in various fields related to tourism. Every working group devised recommendations by the end of the workshop. The recommendations were related to the causes and remedies for the problems identified in the working sessions. These recommendations would be used as a first step in drafting a code of ethics for tourists.

“Due to our existing relationships, many participants and resource people came from the areas around Bethlehem and Jerusalem. However, the input from participants from Nablus, Nazareth, Hebron, and other places was very valuable and highly appreciated. The groups discussed the challenges present in the respective fields and came up with recommendations as a first step towards drafting ethical guidelines for tourists,” says Regula.

A working seminar on Pilgrimages for Transformation was held in Madaba, Jordan, November 14-18, 2007. It was attended by 22 international and 11 Palestinian participants. The seminar focused on sharing ideas about how to develop tourism that is more beneficial to the local community and how to promote responsible behavior by tourists. One of the core questions discussed was whether a code of ethics would be an appropriate tool in the context of tourism in Palestine.

To follow-up on the Pilgrimages for Transformation project, it was decided that the Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism (ECOT), Golan for Development, and ATG should work closely together and decide which other organization can be included in developing further steps of the project.

### **Outside ATG: teaching English in Nahalin**

Regula had been looking for opportunities to get involved in activities outside of her work at ATG. One such opportunity appeared when people from Tent of Nations told her of the possibility of teaching English to a group of women in Nahalin, a village west of Bethlehem. Tent of Nations is built on the understanding that the future of the Palestinian people and nation will always depend on the land. In order to keep the land and remain connected to it, people need to be encouraged and supported to stay in the villages. Life in the countryside under the current occupation regime (The West Bank has been divided into A, B, and C zones, A is mainly Palestinian cities, under Palestinian control. C is most of the countryside, under Israeli control) has become much harder than life in the cities. Their programs reach out to people in the countryside, take care of the land, and bring internationals and people from the cities to the countryside.

The English course that Regula started teaching in mid-January was based on this rationale. The objective was to enable people in the countryside, especially women who have less access to education, to attend classes at an affordable price in their own village. The first course lasted for five weeks and was attended by 15 women of different ages. A second course was organized from mid-March to mid-May.

“For me, the course has been greatly enriching, both in terms of teaching experience and personally. It provided me with unique insight into the lives of women in a rural area that is exposed to the forces of occupation and cut off from population centers through the ongoing construction of the wall in the West Bank (inside the Green Line). It also connected me more directly with the community and enabled me to improve both my Arabic and English language skills. I felt that I could also give something to the community here. Going to Nahalin twice a week provides me with an opportunity to go out of the city. I see how the situation is changing rapidly, with the ongoing construction of the wall and the ongoing expansion of settlements on hilltops all over Palestine.”