IPCRI Open Forum – Tourism as a Tool for Conflict Resolution

The year of 2017 was marked by new records regarding tourism in Israel/Palestine: 3.6 million people entered the country, which was an increase of 25% from previous years. 54% of the visitors were Christians, and 60% visited the country for the first time. 30% of all visitors came with organized tours, and 78% visited Jerusalem. 1.5 million people visited the West Bank during their stay in the region.

These numbers show that tourism is a vital industry in the region. It does not only have enormous economic potential but can also have significant social impacts through the experiences that are offered to tourists. Especially in Israel/Palestine, tourism is being used as a political tool, and different groups apply different approaches in the tours they offer. The aim of this IPCRI forum was to get initial insights into these different approaches, learn about the experiences of experts from the field. This discussion served as a starting point for a larger process, in which IPCRI will host a number of focus groups that will further discuss the relationship between tourism and conflict resolution with the aim to offer recommendations on how to make tours more effective tools of conflict resolution.

Positive Experiences on the other Side
The IPCRI forum hosted several representatives of tour operators, whose aim it is to offer people a positive leisure experience on “the other side”, without addressing political issues. Such tours are not intended to educate or offer alternative narratives, but rather provide a platform for people who would like to travel and enjoy a nice day. Experts present at the forum shared their experiences when organizing tours for Palestinians to Israel, mostly to the beach. The biggest challenge they face is the need for permits and since there are not “tourist permits” available, tour operators need to find alternative solutions for securing the required permits. At the same time, participants highlighted the huge benefits of such tours. In many cases, the only Israelis Palestinians know are soldiers and settlers, but once given the opportunity to see other Israelis, they are exposed to additional perspectives. Another big
advantage is that this exposure happens in a context other than people-to-people initiatives intended to foster dialogue about the conflict. Due to normalization, such people-to-people initiatives are rejected today by many Palestinians, but meeting Israelis while enjoying leisure time at the beach does not fall under that category.

Political Tours
Another group of actors offer tours with political context with the aim to educate by offering alternative narratives and advocate for specific policies. These tours are seeking to address issues that are neglected or excluded by the mainstream narrative, and therefore oftentimes find themselves marginalized in terms of access and resources. Since many of the tours offered in this field are administered by NGOs, their work is dependent on funding from donors. Other operators did introduce their work with a business model. Overall, participants expressed the conviction that such tours can make a political change and contribute to affecting people’s perspectives.

Shared Experiences
A third group of tour providers introduced their work that includes shared experiences of Israelis and Palestinians. Such tours offer tourists the possibility to get to know different narratives in the same tour and allow people to listen to different stories and learn from each other. Initiatives in this category also include projects that promote cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians in the tourism sector, for example around creating shared travel itineraries. While these shared experiences give people access to a variety of narratives, there is also less agreement on how to act and how to prioritize narratives.

Points of Discussion

- **Normalization**: A central point of discussion was the issue of normalization, which significantly affects tourism on the ground. The discussion highlighted differentiation of what kind of tourism is considered as normalizing. While some Palestinian tourists will not participate in tours that involve political, they are open to traveling to Israel and enjoying leisure time at key sites, like the beach. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a high demand for such leisure tours.

- **Bureaucratic Hurdles**: Due to the lack of cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian tourism ministries, high bureaucratic hurdles pose challenges for tour operators. One the one hand, the issue of needing to secure permits for Palestinians before they can enter Israel limits the scope of Palestinian tourism to Israel. On the other hand, only 12% of West Bank certified tour guides are eligible for permits to guide in Jerusalem, highlighting the difficulty of Palestinians presenting their narrative in Jerusalem and Israel.
• **Resources**: Participants discussed the advantages and disadvantages of a business-oriented model as opposed to a non-profit model. The discussion also touched upon the question as to how organizations offering alternatives to the status-quo compete with the immense resources available to the mainstream narrative.

• **Approach to narratives**: Coming from various different backgrounds, participants discussed the different approaches to political tourism. One of the questions was whether certain narratives should be given priority over others, especially ones that are overrepresented in the mainstream, or whether multiple narratives should be highlighted at the same time.

**Recommendations**

1. In order to foster Palestinian tours to Israel, “tourist permits” could be a way to make access to Israeli easier.

2. More cooperation is needed between Israel and Palestine, and between different tour providers, in order to increase the impact of tourism on conflict resolution.

3. Increased cooperation and touristic exchanges can give an economic incentive to end the occupation.