

Profiling Visitors to Palestine: The Case of Bethlehem City

Jafar Subhi Suleiman, School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, abahre2006@yahoo.com

Badaruddin Mohamed, School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, bada@usm.my

Abstract

Regardless of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians a large number of international tourists visit the Holy Land every day. Despite the fact that people visit Palestine on daily basis simple information about visitors' profile to Palestinian tourism places and trip characteristics is not visible in the tourism academic literature. This information is necessary for marketing purposes. Thus, the major aim of this paper was to profile international visitors to Bethlehem city in the West Bank. About 300 questionnaires were randomly distributed in popular places in Bethlehem and 198 usable questionnaires were completed. Like in many other world communities, tourism in Palestine is needed to maintain local livelihoods and bring prosperity.

Keywords: Bethlehem, Palestinian tourism, profiling visitors.

An Introduction to Impact of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict on Palestinian Tourism

The Middle East region is widely regarded as an unsafe destination due to the Iraq war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other factors. In this context, Palestine has played a vital role since the 1993 peace agreement that led to an increase in the number of visitors and pilgrims to Palestine, Israel and neighboring countries. The policy of Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities ought them to be responsible for carrying out the tourism development strategy; through the tourism promotion policies for locals, regionalists, and internationals as well as operating, maintaining and protecting all Palestinian Authority (PA) cultural tourism sites, along with other tourism activities in Palestine (Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), 2001).

However, the Palestinian tourism sector has suffered since the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, mainly in the Palestinian Territories (East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip). Some researchers have discussed Israel's actions against the Palestinian tourism sector, and have also highlighted the extent to which inbound tourists and pilgrims come to Palestine but stay for only a few hours (Sizer, 1999; Al-Rimmawi, 2003; Isaac, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2009; 2008). This is attributed to the negative campaigns associated with Israeli tour operators who dominate the tourism sector in Palestine. These mislead international tourists by presenting a false image of Palestine as a dangerous and insecure place, causing a slowdown in tourist numbers. Other obstacles include the shortage of services and facilities offered by the Palestinian tourism ministry in collaboration with the private sector. Sizer (1999), who works as a British tour operator, listed the difficulties and a number of ethical issues that were encountered by tour operators, pilgrims and their leaders in dealing with the Israeli authorities.

The breakdown of the peace process in September 2000 had a great effect on the economic conditions in Palestine because of restrictions, roadblocks, the apartheid wall, and separation

barriers that limited the movement of workers and goods and the provision of services (Isaac, 2010a; 2010b; Isaac & Platenkamp, 2010). This was reflected in an increase in poverty among Palestinians (Hara, 2004). According to the Palestinian Central Bureau Statistics (PCBS, Hotel Activities, 2009) that the number of visitor arrivals to Palestine were (452, 625) in the year of 2009 comparing to year of 2001 were (60, 208) (see Figure 1).

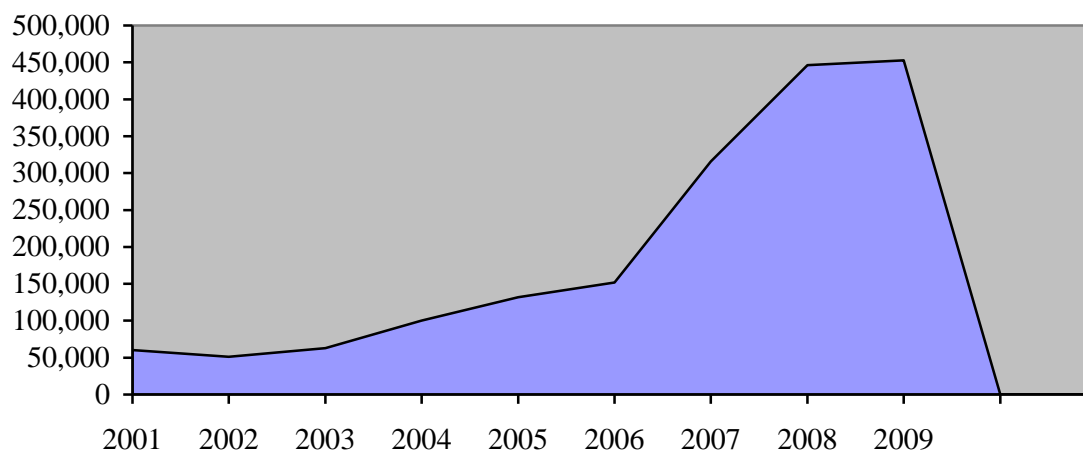


Figure 1: Number of visitors to Palestine from 2001 to 2009. Source: PCBS (Palestinian Central Bureau Statistics, Hotel Activity Survey, 2010)

However, in 2001, there was a delay in hotel construction in the West Bank and Gaza, possibly due to trip cancellations. The most popular Palestinian tourist restaurants are located in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Jericho. However, According to a Non Government Organization (NGO International Alerts, 2006) Jerusalem restaurants suffer from high municipal and income taxes, high rents and poor locations which seriously limit the number of visitors. Restaurants in the more distant cities such as Bethlehem and Jericho also have few tourist customers which has led them to stagnate.

UNWTO (2005) cited the impact of Israeli occupation during the invasion of Palestinian cities in the middle of 2000. This occupation created negative impacts on the tourism sector and the number of visitors, destroyed a number of Palestinian tourism enterprises and halted hotel construction. Employee dismissals impacted severely on family incomes.

Under the Israeli occupation, guide licenses have been limited by high cost, a Hebrew learning requirement which is difficult for Palestinian citizens, and extreme difficulty in obtaining permission to visit East Jerusalem. Handicraft factories and souvenir shops declined during the first *intifada* (Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation) in the major craft centers of Hebron and Bethlehem. Residents of Arab and Islamic countries bordering Palestine are mostly forbidden to visit Palestine. Access to Palestine from Arab states requires an Israeli visa which is rarely granted.

Tourism in Palestine

Palestine has many places of historical and religious significance, such that Palestine is referred to as “the holy land”. Khano and Sayre (1997) report that Palestine also has a multitude of archeological, cultural and natural resources. Jericho has special entertainment and beach resorts which are as diverse as those of any other destination (Hara, 2004). These make Palestine a major destination for tourists from all over the world. The best-known towns in Palestine are

Bethlehem and Jerusalem, considered a holy place for three monotheistic religions, and most international tourists visit both areas (Al-Rimmawi, 2003). Also, “*the economic infrastructure of Bethlehem itself has been built on the foundations of the needs of visitors to the town*” (Isaac, 2008 p. 73). The Bethlehem Project 2000 was supported by Palestinians, the United Nation and the Israeli government, and was aimed at rehabilitation of Bethlehem infrastructure and renovation of sacred sites in different pilgrimage spots (Isaac, 2010c). As reported by Abu Rabah (1998), the future economic development of Palestine is dependent on the tourism industry. For a long time, Palestine has drawn pilgrims due to the diversity of religious faiths with roots in this area plus other attractions of a cultural, historical, topographical, diplomatic and scientific nature (Cohen-Hattab and Katz, 2001). These brought benefits to the Palestinian economy, primarily through visitor use of the accommodation sector. Despite of the importance of international visitors to Palestine, not much information about their profiles and trip characteristics has been reported. This research note identifies the demographics and travel experiences of international visitors to Bethlehem in the West Bank. While, the number of hotels were increased 3% of June 2010 compared with June 2009. Therefore, the number of the Palestinian accommodations in June of 2010 included 94 hotels with 4,804 rooms and 10,266 beds as well as average number of employees in these was 1,707 (PCBS, 27 September, 2010). Table 1 shows the names and number of hotels and rooms in Bethlehem as well as travel agencies.

Table 1: Accommodation and Travel Agencies in Bethlehem

No.	Accommodation	No. of Rooms	Travel and Tourism Agency
1	Jacir Palace intercontinental Hotel	247	Alternative tourist group
2	Bethlehem Hotel	180	Lama Tours International Tourist
3	Paradise Hotel	129	Bethlehem International Tourist Agency
4	Nativity Hotel	89	Kokali Travel and Tours
5	Sancta Maria Hotel	83	Gloria Tourist and Travel
6	Bethlehem Star Hotel	72	Joy International
7	Grand Hotel	50	Zamzam Company for hajj and Umra
8	Alexander hotel	42	The Golden Gate Tours and Travel
9	Bethlehem Inn	36	Crown Tours and Travels
10	Three Kings Hotel	30	Terra Sancta Tourist Company
11	Saint Antonio Hotel	26	Sky Lark Tours and Travel
12	Millennium Hotel	26	Angel Tours and Travel
13	Bethlehem Palace Hotel	25	Nativity Travel
14	Palace Hotel	25	Mousallam International Tours
15	St.Nicholas Hotel	25	Brothers Tours and Travel
16	Everest Hotel	22	Four Season Company for Tourism and Travel
17	Beit Al-Baraka Youth Hostel	19	
18	Andalus Guesthouse	10	
19	Al-Zaytouna Guesthouse	7	
20	Shepherd Hotel		

Source: Arab Hotel Association (2010), <http://www.palestinehotels.com>
 Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (2010), <http://www.visit-palestine.com>

Profiling Visitors

Profiling of consumers in academic research is important for marketing purposes which may to identify what is driving consumer behavior. Practitioners and researchers in marketing efforts have worked to develop more accurately to identify potential visitors (Chandler & Costello, 2002). According to Abbey (1979) and Woodside and Pitts (1976) as cited by Sarigollu and Huang (2005), the profiling of segments are complements the benefits sought and helping travel suppliers to form travel packages that are more compatible with views, motivations and attitudes of the travellers. Additionally, profile of visitors is providing a better understanding to forecast of travel behavior. Generally socio-demographic variables such as age, income, nationality and education have been considered as relatively usable, since they are easy to measure (Lawson, 1994) and they are identified as appropriate determinants of tourist behavior (Kastenholz, 2002; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Gitelson & Kerstetter, 1990). Marketers are developing ever more complicated techniques to identify and assess differences among segments of their visitor populations (Chandler & Costello, 2002).

According to Weinstein (1987, as cited by Loker & Perdue, 1992) clarifies that “*Good market segmentation research provides operational data that are practical, usable, and readily translatable into strategy*”. The selection of a suitable segmentation basis for example; the characteristic according to which segments are distinguished is necessary for a valuable structuring of the market. Therefore, numerous of variables have been recommended in tourism literature (Pender, 1999; Kotler *et al.*, 1995) and the general marketing (Kotler *et al.*, 1999).

Methods

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of visitors in different terms such as nationality, origin, gender and religion, the number of visits, purpose of visit, length of stay in Palestine and accommodation used. Because of its important religious place, Bethlehem city was selected for this study (Figure 2). Data were collected in July and August, 2008. The first part of the questionnaire requested information about socio-demographic details, and the second part focused on the visitor’s experience in Palestine.

A pilot study was implemented on incoming tourists before conducting the survey. This was conducted to ensure reliable and comprehensive analysis. Almost 300 questionnaires were distributed to international tourists. The questionnaire was distributed in some specific places where tourists are usually present such as hotels and attraction sites in Bethlehem. A number of 198 questionnaires were completed and received. Only international visitors were allowed to complete the questionnaire. The study utilized descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages).



Figure 2: Location of Bethlehem in Palestine. Source: <http://www.visitpalestine.ps>

Results

Visitors Profile

A percentage of 56.6 of the total surveyed emphasizes that the majority of respondents were from Europe, Table 1. American, Asian, and Russian nationalities comprised a percentage of 22.7, 6.1, and 6.1, respectively. African and the Middle Eastern tourists accounted for only 1.5 percent. Visitors from Europe were classified into three groups (Eastern Europe, central-northern Europe and Western Europe). There were 99 Europeans who participated in the survey. Thirty-four respondents indicated the United States of America (USA) as their citizenship (14.6 %), thus making the USA a third largest country of tourist originally. The other thirty-four respondents (9.1 percent) were from further countries.

Table 1
Origin of respondents

Origin	Frequency	Percentage
Central-Northern Europe	38	19.2
United States of America	29	14.6
Southern Europe	21	10.6
Russia	14	7.1

Palestine	9	4.5
Australia & New Zealand	9	4.5
Korea & Philippines	6	3.0
Pakistan	4	2.0
Kuwait	3	1.5
India	3	1.5
Jordan	2	1.0
Indonesia	2	1.0
Other Countries	18	9.1

The age of respondents was also analyzed here as shown in Table 2. The age of visitors ranged between 11 to over 60 years. Nonetheless, the majorities had ages between 21-30 (41.9 percent), the age group 41-50 (14.6 percent) and the age group 51-60 (14.6 percent) were close in number. The group with the least number of respondents comprised those aged above 60 years (7.1 percent). In addition, the gender of the visitors was also investigated. A percentage of 47 of the respondents were males and 53 percent were females. With regard to the marital status of the respondents, 65.2 percent were single, 27.3 percent were married, and 7.6 percent were either divorced or widowed.

Table 2
Age, Gender and Marital Status

Age	Frequency	Percentage%
20 or younger	23	11.6
21 - 30	83	41.9
31 - 40	29	14.6
41 - 50	29	14.6
51 - 60	20	10.1
More than 60	14	7.1
Total	198	100
Gender		
Female	105	53.0
Male	93	47.0
Total	198	100

Marital Status		
Single	129	65.2
Married	54	27.3
Divorce/Widowed	15	7.6
Total	198	100

Table 3 describes the religion of the respondents where 70.2 % of the respondents were Christians. The questionnaires were distributed in Bethlehem which is a holy place for Christians. Large number of respondents was from Europe which is known for its high percentage of Christians (Cipriani, 2009). There were only two Jewish respondents, while 8.6 percent were Muslims. Other respondents were not affiliated with any religion (20.7 percent).

Table 3
Religion

Religion	Frequency	Percentage%
Christianity	139	70.2
Islam	17	8.6
Judaism	2	1.0
Other	40	20.2
Total	198	100

Visitors' Experience

Table 4 shows the number of visits to Palestine by all participants. 69.7 percent were in Palestine for the first time. 12.6 percent were on their second visit, a similar percentage (12.1%) indicated that they had visited Palestine four times or more.

Table 4
Number of visits to Bethlehem

Visit number	Frequency	Percentage%
First time	138	69.7
Second time	25	12.6
Third time	11	5.6
More than three times	24	12.1
Total	198	100

Respondents were asked to name the places or cities they had visited in Palestine, particularly, in the West Bank. Analysis showed that Bethlehem was visited by the majority (93.4%). A relatively large number of respondents visited Jerusalem (51%). Only 32.3 percent of the respondents visited Ramallah (see Table 5). As mentioned before, most foreign tourists prefer visiting Bethlehem because it is considered to be the most important location for pilgrims.

Certain schedules coordinated by Israeli travel agencies have been set up for Christians by international tourist organizations. They allowed them to spend a few hours in Bethlehem. In contrast, Nablus, Jenin, and Hebron were also visited in some cases. However, in some cases, the Israeli checkpoints did not allow them entry to the Palestinian areas.

Table 5
Cities visited by the respondents

City	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Jerusalem	101	51.0
Bethlehem	185	93.4
Ramallah	64	32.3
Jericho	51	25.8
Nablus	31	15.7
Jenin	16	8.1
Tullkarem	9	4.5
Hebron	19	9.5
Other	14	7.1

Note: Respondents were selected more than one answer.

As expected, majority of respondents visited Palestine for religious and spiritual reasons (see Table 6). This is mainly because of the great importance Palestine owns for its embracement of a number of holy places for all three religions

Table 6
Purpose of visit by the respondents

Purpose	Frequency	Percentage%
Religious & spiritual	86	43.4
Visiting family & friends	19	9.6
Leisure & pleasure	48	24.2
Education	17	8.6
Conference	13	6.6
Cultural events/festivals	5	2.5

Business	5	2.5
Total	198	100

The length of accommodation in Palestine is described in Table 7. It shows that about 22.7 percent of the respondents' accommodated in Palestine for two days and one night. 37.4 percent stayed for over five days, and 39.9 percent of the respondents visited for only a few hours before returning to Israel. Many visitors travel under the guidance of Israeli travel agencies, which forces them to leave Palestinian cities in accordance with their itinerary.

Table 7

Length of stay in Bethlehem

Length	Frequency	Percentage
Day trip	79	39.9
2- 4 days	45	22.7
More than 5 days	74	37.4
Total	198	100

Table 8 gives an idea about the most important means of information for visitors. 59.6% indicated that promotional brochures and pamphlets were the main sources of information. The World Wide Web sites (43.4 percent) was also an important mean where respondents had information about Palestine. Friends and family members were a source of information resources (42.4 percent). Newspapers and magazines found to be a good information source to 41.4 %.

Table 8

Source of information

Types of Source	No. of Respondents	Percentage%
Brochure/pamphlets	118	59.6
World Wide Web (WWW)	86	43.4
Friends/family members	84	42.4
Newspapers/magazines	82	41.4
Books in library	69	34.8
T.V/Radio	62	31.3
Travel agency/tour operator	50	25.3
Word of mouth	50	25.3
School/college/university	34	17.2
Movies/videos	26	13.1

Business colleagues	19	9.6
Other	15	7.6
Palestinian embassy/consulate	9	4.5

Note: Respondents selected more than one answer.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study had one main objective to identify the characteristics and behavior of international visitors to Palestine. It confirmed that many international tourists to Palestine are from Europe, perhaps because there are no visa requirements for European citizens and generally good relations between Israel and Europe. It is well known that a person who visits Israel finds it easy to enter Palestine, when operators are available. Bethlehem city is a well known holy place for Christians on a pilgrimage. In addition to that, the proximity of Israel and Palestine, the low prices, and accommodation availability are encouragements for tourists to visit Palestine. Good relations between Bethlehem citizens and Europeans encourage them to travel to Palestine.

With respect to Middle Eastern tourists, only a few were reported. However, there may have been misreporting of nationality because, with the exception of Jordan and Egypt, citizens of Arab countries are not allowed to visit Israel or Palestine. The two exceptions have a peace agreement with Israel but citizens from these countries still have great difficulty in acquiring an Israeli visa.

Four Pakistanis out of fourteen Asians were counted. This makes Pakistan the highest Asian country of origin. Most of the Asians traveled on British passports and two Indonesian respondents traveled on temporary Egyptian passports. Respondents from Australia and New Zealand represented only 4.5% due to distance and high airfares. 4.5 % of respondents were originally from Palestine but had acquired other nationalities and, ironically, were able to enter Palestine via Israel.

People of Palestinian nationality are barred from visiting certain places. This is because Israel controls the Palestinian borders, and Palestine does not have an airport at which international tourists can arrive and depart directly. Visitors usually travel under the guidance of Israeli travel agencies, which oblige them to adhere to their timetable and only a few respondents stated that they visited other Palestinian cities such as Nablus, Jenin, and Hebron because of the presence of Israeli checkpoints. This is confirmed by Al-Rimmawi (2003) who noted that 91 percent of visitors to Israel and Palestine visit Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and an absence of international tourists in the Al-Badan Parks located in Nablus governorate. Schedules set up by the international tourist organizations for Christians, in association with Israeli travel agencies, allow them to spend only a few hours in the Bethlehem area.

Most visitors claimed their main reason for visiting Palestine was for religious and spiritual purposes. However, it was noticed that many travelers visited Palestine for only a few hours and returned to Israel because the Israeli authority does not permit their tourist groups to stay in Bethlehem city more than 45 minutes to see the Basilica of Nativity and 15 minutes for shopping (Isaac, 2010a; Al-Rimmawi, 2003).

The study also found that information on Palestine came mostly from brochures and pamphlets, the Internet, travel agencies, tour operators and books. However, a few respondents gained information about Palestine from the Palestinian embassies. Information is important because tourists do not have long time to spend in the Palestinian regions.

In conclusion, tourism in Palestine is very sensitive to political events and in order to achieve more benefits from tourism authorities should value peace as a main player. This information may help Palestinian tourism policy makers in public and private sectors to evaluate the situation

of tourism sector in Palestine in general and in Bethlehem particularly. Tourism is needed to maintain local livelihoods and the challenges to tourism must be removed. Additionally, tourism is seen as helping to sustain the Palestinians as one society in the face of occupation, and to retain important links to their homeland.

References

- Abu-Rabah, A. (1998). *Palestinian Tourism: Concepts, and Visions*. Jerusalem: Al-Amal Press.
- Al-Rimmawi, H. A. (2003). Palestinian tourism: a period of transition. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 15 (2), 76-85.
- Baloglu, S., & Brinberg, D. (1997). Affective Images of Tourism Destinations. *Journal of Travel Research*, 35 (4), 11-15.
- Chandler, J. A., & Costello, C. A. (2002). A Profile of Visitors at Heritage Tourism Destinations in East Tennessee according to Plog's Lifestyle and Activity Level Preferences Model. *Journal of Travel Research*, 41, 161-166.
- Cipriani, R. (2009). Religions in Europe. *Religion*, 39(2), 109-116.
- Cohen-Hattab, K., & Katz, Y. (2001). The attraction of Palestine: Tourism in the years 1850-1948. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 27(2), 166-177.
- Gitelson, R.J., & Kerstetter, D. L. (1990). The Relationship between sociodemographic variables, benefits sought and subsequent vacation behavior: a case study. *Journal of Travel Research*, 28 (3),24-29.
- Hara, T. (2004). *Estimating the economic impacts of the tourism industrial complex on the west bank and Gaza: An analysis of the crossroads of tourism and terrorism along the road map for peace*. Ithaca, NY.
- Isaac, R. K. (2008). Master of Arts in Pilgrimage and Tourism. *Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development*, 5(1), 73-76.
- Isaac, R. K. (2009). Alternative Tourism: Can the Segregation Wall in Bethlehem be a Tourist Attraction? *Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development*, 6(3), 247-254.
- Isaac, R. K. (2010a). Palestinian Tourism in Transition: Hope, Aspiration, or Reality? *The Journal of Tourism and Peace Research*, 1(1), 23-42.
- Isaac, R. K. (2010b). Moving from pilgrimage to responsible tourism: the case of Palestine. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 13(6), 579-590.
- Isaac, R. K. (2010c). Alternative tourism: new forms of tourism in Bethlehem for the Palestinian tourism industry. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 13, 21-36.
- Isaac, R.K., & Platenkamp, V. (2010). Volunteer tourism in Palestine: A normative approach. In O. Moufakkir., & I. Kelly (Eds.), *Tourism, progress and peace* (pp.148-161). London: CABI Publishing.
- Kastenholz, E. (2002). *The role and marketing implications of destination images on tourist behavior: The case of northern Portugal*, PhD dissertation, Universidade de Aveiro, UMI dissertation Services.
- Kotler, P., Armstrong, G., Saunders, J., & Wong, V. (1999). *Principles of Marketing*. London: Prentice Hall Europe.
- Kotler, P., Haider, D.H., & Rein, I. (1995). *Marketing Places*. New York, Oxford, Singapore, Sydney: The Free Press Maxwell Maxmillan International.
- Khano, M., & Sayre, E. (1997). *The Palestinian Tourism Sector: Present State and Future Prospects*. Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS).
- Loker, E.L., & Perdue, R.R. (1992). A Benefit-based Segmentation of a Nonresident Summer Travel Market. *Journal of Travel Research*, Summer 1992, 30-35.

- Lawson, R. (1994). Demographic segmentation. In S. Witt., & L. Moutinho (Eds.), *The handbook of tourism marketing and management* (pp. 311-316). London: Prentice Hall International.
- NGO International Alert (2006). *Local business, local peace: The peace building potential of the domestic private sector "Israel and Palestine"*.
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), issues a press release on the Occasion of World Tourism Day, (September 27, 2010), Ramallah - Palestine.
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), Hotel Activities in the Palestinian Territory (2009), Ramallah - Palestine.
- Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR) in Cooperation with Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2001. Palestinian Tourism Development Strategy.
- Pender, L. (1999). *Marketing Management for Travel and Tourism*. Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes.
- Sarigollu, E., & Huang, R. (2005). Benefits Segmentation of Visitors to Latin America. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43, 277-293.
- Sizer, S.R. (1999). The Ethical Challenges of Managing Pilgrimages to The Holy Land. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 11(2-3), 85-90.
- UNWTO (2005). *Tourism Development Strategy Short-Term Action Programme Palestine*: (Madrid: Spain).