

TO DO! 2006
Contest Socially Responsible Tourism

Award Winner

**ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP
(ATG)**

Represented by:

**Mr. Rami Kassis, Executive Director
Beit Sahour**

Palestine

Rationale for the Award

by

Klaus Betz

Note: All of the following comments by the author relate exclusively to the Palestinian part of West Jordan (West Bank) and not(!) to the Gaza Strip, which is not within the area of activity of the price winner and would have to be assessed completely differently in a political analysis.

From the Notebook:

(Bethlehem/Palestine, 21.11.06) The “waiter“ at the Paradise Hotel in Bethlehem has a full-time job as teacher in a school located about 30 kilometres away, in Hebron. He works at the school during the day and has not received a salary for the last seven months. The Palestinian National Authority can not pay. To survive he works at the hotel in the evenings. His students know this and respect him greatly for the fact that he nevertheless comes to the school every day in order to teach them. According to the “waiter’s” own account, the students have treated him with great respect ever since he began doing this. He said, “We have a totally different relationship to one another.“When asked why he does this, he immediately answered: “It is our way of showing resistance.“

1. INTRODUCTION

The author travelled in Palestine, West Jordan, from 18th to 25th November 2006 on assignment from Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V. in order to personally examine the TO DO! entry of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP (ATG) on location.

Finding: The assessor recommends awarding the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP (ATG) with the TO DO! Prize during the ITB 2007 in appreciation of its goals, concepts and realisation.

2. BACKGROUND

The author of this award rationale has travelled to Israel and the Israeli-occupied territories in Palestine once or twice per year for over ten years on journalistic assignments on behalf of various media. He has developed familiarity with the daily life in this conflict-ridden area through talks and contacts (as well as friendships) on both sides, which has arisen thanks to the local people who over the years have let the reporter feel that no Israeli or Palestinian would knowingly jeopardise the safety of a guest. Both sides are constantly aware that they live in a conflict-ridden area and treat visitors in a careful and responsible manner.

What this means for tourism is that Israelis normally approach travel through the “Holy Land“ with a careful emphasis on “security“, signalled by the police forces and military troops of their country. At the same time, however, there is also a subliminal transfer of their fears. Security checks can take place anywhere, in front of restaurants, at post offices or at other neuralgic spots. From the Israelis’ point of view, the Palestinians represent a direct threat as a potential enemy. Consequently, quite a few Israelis live and think in a state of inner alert.

Palestinians living in the West Bank, on the other hand, appear to be somewhat more relaxed (as long as they are on their own soil and are not being confronted by Israeli soldiers). In contrast to the Israelis, they do not have to fear any suicide bombers but rather special Israeli troops who, hunting for extremists, repeatedly penetrate into the West Bank cities, condoning “collateral damage“.

Nonetheless, Palestinians who lead travel groups through West Jordan can also rely on the support of an invincible network of human solidarity and support, as well as on their conflict-born ability for rapid dissemination of information about problem situations. Meaning: Keep away from everything that can jeopardise guests.

Despite the at times unbearable conditions due to the occupation (see 3.2, second and third paragraph), innumerable check points and associated harassments, notwithstanding the efforts of the Israeli military (Israel Defense Forces) to limit the Palestinians’ freedom of movement, and the road network in the West Bank that is partly only open to the Israelis, the daily life in the history rich West Bank and its highly interesting religious history still proceeds with astounding

regularity. However, in its official travel and security instructions, the German Foreign Office arrives at the following assessment: "Travel to the West Bank is generally discouraged." (See Annex, last page).

Independently of this the following should be kept in mind: The impressions that can be collected on a journey in Palestine can be full of contradictions. On the one hand, the Palestinian refugee camps have been in existence for decades (e.g. in and around Bethlehem), without any clear solution in sight. In world opinion, they are perceived as a negative occurrence and a misery administered by the United Nations. On the other hand, many Palestinians enjoy enormously high educational levels – there are theatres, universities, music and concerts, painters, film makers, the finest artistic handicrafts, good restaurants (without any tourist traps), accomplished artisans, architects and physicians. In short, there is a civil society. And yet, the television images disseminated around the world focus primarily on exacerbated situations, thus showing an incomplete and slanted picture. In other words: the television perception in the West throws a negative image on Palestinians.

On the other hand, the persistent feeling in the "Holy Land" is that both parties to the conflict are afraid of one another; both societies are traumatized and both perceive themselves as victims whose existence is threatened. One of the most difficult phenomena is that the extremists on both sides play in each other's hands and mutually provoke each other. However, both societies also know very well that they have driven themselves into a blind alley with each new exacerbation of the conflict – without being able to find the U-turn for a turnaround, which would at least enable recreating the kind of atmosphere that had already been achieved in the environment of the Oslo Accord. In the mid-nineties personal encounters between Israelis and Palestinians were still a practical reality. Since the beginning of the second Intifada¹ on 28 September 2000 and the subsequent restriction prohibiting Israeli citizens from travelling to the West Bank (except for drives into the settlements), the possibilities of conciliation and personal encounters have diminished to nearly zero. (Palestinians are generally not allowed to travel into the state territory of Israel).

Most Israelis thus hardly know "what *the Palestinians* are really like" and how they live and think, or have any knowledge of activities conducted in the name of Israel in the occupied territories, unless they regularly read the articles by the renowned Israeli journalist Amira Hass, who has reported from the Palestinian region for years and lives there. On the other hand, most Palestinians, primarily the young ones, also do not have any idea of the desire for peace of many Israelis. They know them only from afar, as soldiers or occupation forces, or as latent militant settlers.

The growing segregation of the two societies is made even greater by the discriminatory measures of the former and present Israeli government. The ongoing construction of the wall or the border fence arbitrarily erected by the Israeli side is a visible sign of this segregation. While the "security fence" purportedly protects the Israeli society from Palestinian extremists and bomb assassins, those who are familiar with the topography of the West Bank (the landscape characteristics and geopolitical situation) know that this can be a capital error.

Many Palestinians, however, fear that they will be completely forgotten behind the progressive immurement of the West Bank cities in the long term. Mitri Raheb, Christian Palestinian minister of the Christmas Church in Bethlehem described the situation in this way: "If the development continues, one day the West Bank will look like Emmenthaler cheese. The Palestinians will sit in the holes and the cheese will belong to Israel."

The effect of this image has been observed in the area of tourism for a long time. The reason: Since nearly all incoming holiday tourists, pilgrims, visitors or politically interested persons arrive via Tel Aviv (the majority of travellers initially come to visit the tourist attractions in Israel and take detours into the Palestinian areas only if this cannot be avoided, as in the case of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem), for all practical purposes the Israeli tourism industry has

¹ The immediate occasion was the provocative visit of the temple mound in Jerusalem by then opposition leader and later Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

the monopoly over organised travel (hotels, touring coaches, design of visitor programmes). It has the control over finances and tourism policy, and the Palestinians are left out in the cold (see Point 3.1).

Without Christian church travel organisations or travel operators with a background of pilgrim tourism or cultural history orientation, it would not be possible to speak of a kind of tourism which enables encounters with Palestinians or the Early Christian communities that still exist today, not to mention the ability of organisations such as the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP to demonstrate their capability and reliability and realise their goals. The following will provide further elaborations on how this happens.

3. THE ORGANISATION

The ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP is organised in the form of an NGO (non-government organisation), but functions as a cultural-political, tourism-oriented incoming agency. The registered office of the organisation is in Beit Sahour. The small city located in the direct vicinity of Bethlehem has around 14 000 residents. Approximately 75 percent of the Beit Sahouri population is Christian (with an Orthodox majority). Compared with other regions, this is a city with a concentration of highly educated middle class residents that has the highest share of university graduates in the entire West Bank. Quite a few of the residents have studied or lived abroad, have the worldwide contacts and the required *know-how* for cooperative activities with international organisations (mainly with church-related and secular organisations working in the area of social support and/or development cooperation).

The office of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP is housed in a building adjunct of the Lutheran School of Beit Sahour and has a total of five permanent multilingual employees. In addition, the organisation works together with a staff of independent partners (such as travel guides, drivers, car rental companies, bus operators, hotels, restaurants and bed & breakfast hosts). The business premises of ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP are furnished with modern office and communication equipment and can technically accommodate the full organisation of a travel tour for groups as well as individual tourists. The service range extends from the issuance of the offer to the performance of the travel tours.

3.1 Origin and Aims

In the early and mid nineties a group of intellectuals gathered together in Beit Sahour in order to pursue the seemingly simple question of why tourists visit exclusively the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem only to depart again without seeking or desiring any contacts with Palestinians. In the knowledge that it would not be able to achieve any quick changes in the political image and negative stereotypes about Palestinians, the founding group took on the self-appointed mission to strive for a change in image at the human level and attempt to bring people together as a grassroots organisation. One could also say, to start a "Meet-the-People" programme with a view to achieving several objectives with the aid of a more equitable tourism²: For example:

- To also benefit from tourism in the "Holy Land" and to ensure that the income that can be generated is passed on directly to the population. This also includes offering and utilizing the existing Palestinian infrastructure (hotels, restaurants, transport, guides etc). Another objective of ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP which has retained its importance into the present is: To encourage the visitors to the Palestinian regions, whose numbers began to grow a decade ago (and have continued to grow since 2004) to prolong their stay in the area.

² Exactly the right strategy in the peace-oriented atmosphere and the prospects of the "Bethlehem 2000 Boom", (Author). A second Intifada and a "September 11" were neither conceivable nor could be foreseen at the time.

- To also bring tourists in direct contact with the Palestinian population in order to promote a better understanding for the Arab-Palestinian history and culture and for the Palestinians as people (see Point 3.2). On the other hand – while the activities offered by ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP are already geared toward historic cultural and tourist attractions – interested tourists can also find out about the daily reality, the socio-political situation in the occupied territories in this way. These are impressions that can not be experienced under the aegis of an Israeli travel guide.

The ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP (ATG) was founded in 1995 against the backdrop of these objectives. In the early stages it operated mainly with support from the Dutch organisation ICCO (Interchurch Organisation for Development Co-operation).

Since 2000, ATG conducts its own independent activities. Overall, in the course of time, eleven church-related, development and socio-politically active organisations and advocacy initiatives³, domestic and international, have become involved as contact and cooperation partners offering material and spiritual support. Through the network cooperation with all these organisations ATG is in a position to receive travel groups from countries such as France, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, and thus to gradually pursue its self-appointed objectives. In 1999 and 2000, the organisation accommodated around 2100 guests per year. Following the 2nd Intifada and “September 11” the number of visitors dropped drastically below the 500 per year mark with a subsequent return to growth to the present level of nearly 1200 tourists per year.

It is a matter of continuing importance that the sale of travel guides published in English and French by ATG (German is in preparation) has continued to bring perceptible additional income. The 440-page handbook about “Palestine & Palestinians” sells for 20 Euro (it is meanwhile being distributed in Canada, the USA and several European countries) and is by far the only qualitatively very good “insider travel guide” about Palestine (with hotels, route descriptions, sightseeing attractions, telephone numbers, addresses and a lot of background information).

3.2 Programme and Conception

Apart from the fact that the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP takes a political and socio-political position, it is not a dogmatic propaganda organisation. The intention is to provide the valued visitors with positive and astounding experiences with Palestinians in Palestine (music, food, conversation, and well-being). Despite the circumstances, and despite the conflict.

Nevertheless, particular attention is given to questions, which frequently arise naturally and are asked by visitors, since, whether one visits Jericho, Nablus or Abraham’s grave in Hebron, political questions come up without any help from ATG. In Hebron, for example, around 500 settlers who are prone to become aggressive occupied the centre of the old city, settlers who in turn are protected by about 1 000 Israeli soldiers.

If one takes a “normal” walk through or around the old city of Hebron with a specially trained ATG travel guide, depending on the route taken, between six and eight Israeli-controlled inner city checkpoints have to be passed. Meanwhile quite a few of the bazaar alleys in the inner city have been covered with mesh wire roof to protect people from objects that are repeatedly thrown at the Arab population by Israeli settlers from the nearby houses. Empty bottles and gar-

³ Among others the French Catholic Committee against hunger and development CCFD (comité catholique contre la faim et le développement) or the Swedish study network Bilda - for Churches and Community Questions (Studieförbundet Bilda för kyrka och samhälle).

bage are among the harmless objects. Whenever such occurrences are noted they necessarily also stir political discussion.

However, such experiences are not the rule. As already mentioned, the positive aspects are in the foreground. One of the greatest assets ATG can boast of are the nearly 100 private accommodations with families living in the city conglomerate of Beit Sahour, Bethlehem and Beit Jala who rent rooms on a "Bed & Breakfast" basis (mainly up to European standard with their own sanitary facilities). This means that ATG refers hotel accommodations as well as accommodations with families and can respond to individual wishes (age, families with children, if possible professional or religious interests, etc.). Even organising lunch meals at different host families for a travelling bus group is possible – given sufficient advance notice – and has already been practiced on several occasions. Direct encounter is therefore the decisive factor. ATG wishes to present a different picture of Palestinians in line with the aforementioned objectives.

The second important effect is naturally that the income from this form of tourism is received directly by the families and thus contributes significantly to their subsistence. To his great joy, the appraiser himself had the opportunity to spend several days with a young family with children in Beit Sahour, where he became familiar with their habits, food, specialties and learned a lot about the job situation (the husband was artisan, the wife was a social worker at YMCA) and about the wishes and hopes of the young family.

Independently of this, ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP operates as a normal tourism incoming agency and offers trained, frequently multilingual guides for outings (including of historic religious nature) to Bethlehem, Hebron, Ramallah, Jericho and other locations. However, ATG also offers visits to the refugee camps and Bedouin communities.

In addition, good organisation often pays off in meetings with Palestinians and – on the other side – Israelis in Jerusalem as well (contacts are still maintained to peace and human rights groups by telephone or e-mail, so that interested visitors can be referred accordingly). Academic contacts, leading political personalities, government officials or employees of NGOs are also included. Those who are looking for an offer in political history (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian situation before 1948, religion and the state, development issues today) can also contact the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP. ATG disposes over a very broad network that is deeply anchored in Palestinian society.

4. ASSESSMENT

The comparison of the activities of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP with the eight TO DO! contest criteria for socially responsible tourism led to the following assessment:

<p style="text-align: center;">Taking into account the different interests and needs of the local people through participation</p>

The entire activities of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP are directed to this criterion in accordance with the aforementioned circumstances. However, there is an ongoing need to ensure tourist groups are even willing to stay overnight in the Palestinian territory. This is gradually being accomplished with more success again, thanks to travel groups or individual tourists/repeat visitors from the church or social and development policy background (see Development of Visitors Numbers under 3.1).

The starting point is that in 1997 around 270 000 US dollars were made available by the Japanese government through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in connection with

the boom expected in the “Bethlehem 2000“ year, for the development of a bed & breakfast structure in the closely connected city areas of Beit Sahour, Bethlehem and Beit Jala.⁴ This project was a success and functions to the present day.

The leadership for the realisation of this project was taken over by the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP, which was already a renowned and acknowledged NGO with grassroots affiliations at the time. The local media were used for attracting interested families to the bed & breakfast programme. However, it was clearly stated from the very beginning that this measure was not intended simply for the renovation of housing space or the construction of an additional bathroom, but rather should serve several objectives. Interested families were encouraged to become involved as hosts; and to spend shared evenings and dinners with their guests (to enable them in the future, from the human and familiar side to begin with, to join in the conversation and to differentiate in matters concerning the image of the Palestinians). The intended purpose of generating additional income at the local level – for the artisans and for the families – was presented as being secondary in importance. (See also criterion “Participation of a broad population strata“).

After the applicants screening, over 30 families initially received renovation grants of up to 8 000 US dollars from the aforementioned fund for building of adequate guestrooms and bathrooms (ergo the already mentioned “European Standard“). The overnight accommodation prices were at 25 US dollars per guest. It was planned – and until the outbreak of the second Intifada and subsequent events surrounding “September 11“ also realised – that every family would pay back into the fund via ATG 5 US dollars per night and guest, in order to develop a revolving system. The inflow of funds could then be used for the support of additional families in their building improvement projects.

In addition to these structural measures the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP also works together with restaurant owners, hotel operators, travel guides, bus companies or other Palestinian service providers. ATG’s permanent objective is the strengthening of Palestinian identity/society/economy; that is to say, the long term ability to survive in a future state/in a nation that will perhaps be independent in the future. Meaning: It is a question of maintaining independent structures, independent knowledge, skills and abilities, without which a nation can not possibly be independent.

Strengthening awareness among the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development in their everyday economic, social and cultural life
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This criterion is not applicable in the case of ATG and travel to Palestine. Currently, the Palestinian side is only interested in getting a chance to accommodate visiting tourists on their own accord – in view of the Israeli-dominated tourism.

Risks in the sense of proliferating tourism development in the already densely populated cities of the West Bank (high real estate prices) or the danger of a loss of cultural identity could not be established. On the contrary: In the Palestinian regions the preservation of identity is a part of the political resistance movement. In view of this, the activities of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP are directed rather at the visitors. On the one hand it is hoped that tourists travelling through the West Bank and meeting with the local population could be made aware of the Palestinian culture, its heritage and tradition. On the other hand, it is also hoped that the travellers will see the living conditions of the Palestinian civil population. (See also the criterion “Strengthening of the local culture“).

⁴ In addition to the funds that were once provided by many nations in order to build hotels and streets, to guarantee public services such as garbage removal, drinking water supply etc..., to maintain or renovate historic buildings and boroughs up to the reconstruction of the airport in the Gaza Strip, which has meanwhile been destroyed.

Participation of broad local population strata in the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism.

Currently it is roughly estimated that 85 to 88 US dollars out of every 100 US dollars earned by the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP for a tourism service are received directly by the service providers (who range from bus operators to olive wood carvers). About 12 to 15 US dollars are retained by ATG as cover for the administrative and operational costs.

Relative to the B&B hosts this means the following: If two visitors can be accommodated with a family in a double room for one week with half-board, the hosts receive about 40 US dollar per day or 280 US dollars per week from ATG. This corresponds to one third to nearly a half of the average monthly income (600 to 900 US dollars) of a relatively well situated Palestinian family in the West Bank. This, however, just about suffices for the daily needs but is not enough for savings or reserves. The everyday life of the population is characterised by high unemployment or permanent occasional jobs or daily labour, and can frequently be only financed through loans, which in turn hinge on bank transfers from family members who live and work abroad. Those who do not have these possibilities subsist and survive in the West Bank on only 4 to 6 US dollars per day. A multilingual, well educated Palestinian travel guide earns about 20 US dollars per day, but he does not get a job every day.

For the rest the following applies: One must view the entire West Bank as an additional "domestic market" for the Israeli economy (tomatoes from the Gaza Strip or bananas from Jericho only seldom reach the markets in Bethlehem or Nablus). If one goes into a supermarket in the West Bank, it is obvious that about 60 to 70 percent of foodstuffs is of Israeli origin, and that they are generally cheaper than the domestic or local products. The many Palestinians who have little money at their disposal can't be choosy.

Nevertheless, ATG expends continuous efforts to ensure that Palestinian products are also processed or offered in the restaurants visited by the ATG groups. This is not always an easy task for restaurant owners, since the purchase and sale of an Israeli beer costs about half as much as its Palestinian equivalent. The same applies to Cola, juices, wine, etc.

There is therefore a constant need for information to the service providers as well as guests if this "Colonial effect" is to be counteracted.

Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism for the local people by improving working conditions relative to payment, social security, working hours, as well as education and further training

In the current situation this criterion, too, can only be applied to a limited degree. The main issue is to find an employment possibility for earning income and to assure survival. All else is still to be accorded secondary importance at this time. (See passage "From the Notebook" at the beginning of this award rationale).

Depending on the living situation (whether in the refugee camp or as established West Bank resident) the social well-being and status is initially based on the extended family or clan. After that further aspects such as school or university education come into play. Those working in tourism frequently have a Christian-Palestinian background, and generally have a university degree, as well as some foreign experience, and for the most part can speak one, two or even three foreign languages.

Reinforcement of the local culture as well as the cultural identity of those living in tourism destination areas

This criterion is over fulfilled at the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP. It has the highest priority. In this case, the motivation is most certainly political. As a result of the conflict, West Jordan has long had an extremely sharp collective awareness of the existence as Palestinians, as well as a well developed knowledge of the associated image in the Western world.

ATG's main concern tends to be with the "export" of identity rather than with the urgently needed preservation or strengthening of identity. What this means is that tourist encounter travel is seen as offering the chance to ensure the dissemination of Palestinian culture, existence and intentions to the outside world – through personal encounters with Palestinians based on interpersonal relationships. ATG even maintains that tourists travelling with it have the opportunity to "explore the Palestinian culture and traditions".

Avoidance or minimisation of social and cultural damage caused by tourism in destination areas

With the exception of Bethlehem the West Bank does not have any noteworthy mass of visitors that could cause tourism-related social or cultural damage. In Bethlehem itself (with its current number of approximately 600 000 visitors arriving mainly from Israel per year) the focus is very limited. The tourists' interest is concentrated mainly on the Church of the Nativity, but can be associated with occasional high traffic volumes (coaches). This is one form of tourism that is controlled mainly by the Israeli side, on which ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP can not exercise any influence – though it concerns Palestinian territory.

Within the sphere of influence of ATG special care is taken (and expressly requested) to ensure that the respective encounters and meetings are conducted with due respect of the local customs and traditions. As already mentioned, approx. 1200 guests experience these encounters on a "friends visiting friends" basis rather than at the purely tourist business level. The standards practically always remain the same – whether with respect to the shared evening with musicians, the harvesting of olives together with a Palestinian family or the visit to a mosque (which includes a talk with an Imam). The same applies to the visit to the glass blowers of Hebron or a round of discussion with Palestinian politicians.

Projects and measures entered into the contest must be in line with the principles of environmental compatibility

For the water supply nearly the entire West Bank depends on the allocation through Israel, which holds or has acquired the authority over the water rights. One of the most important issues in this area for the Palestinians is: don't waste water. One is therefore grateful to every guest who does not insist on taking a shower three times a day.

Another (in this case political) problem is the uncontrolled development of open spaces through the continued construction of Israeli settlements, which are generally built on a hill or mountain top. Associated with this is the construction of by-pass-roads⁵ which are rutting the landscape and last but not least the construction of the wall and border fence, which gobs up a lot of land area. In this process, thus far Israel's (security) interests have stood exclusively in the forefront, with the result that numerous fields and pastures have been destroyed, lie idle, can no longer be

⁵ Roads from the settlements which bypass Palestinian territory and have a direct connection to the core area of Israel.

accessed by their Palestinian owners as well as that many olive trees (including very old ones) are being felled.

The realisation of environmental measures is not easy under these circumstances. Nevertheless the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP repeatedly succeeds in organizing tree planting campaigns together with other organisations (mainly olives), mostly in areas that are either “up-rooted” or in areas which are in danger of being confiscated by the occupation power.

<p style="text-align: center;">What measures or mechanisms can guarantee the economic and institutional sustainability of the project?</p>

Normally it is fitting to say the same of the future of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP as for the future of the West Bank: Nothing could be predictable for the future. Everything depends on the manner in which the peace process will hopefully become perceptible again and develop in this “Holy Land” in the near future, since it is this process that most directly influences the visitor numbers in Palestine (as well as in Israel), and the decisive final word on the continued existence of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP. Viewed in this way, an economic measure that would secure the future (such as equity formation) is almost inconceivable. Institutionally, however, in comparison to the very difficult years in the recent past – the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP will certainly survive as a NGO. If needed, through the simple voluntary commitment of its members. Because Palestinians have amply demonstrated in the past that in contrast to their extremely rich and almost opulent cuisine they can subsist on a simple specialty that has become famous as a political symbol: “zeit and za’atar” – bread and olive oil and a mixture of thyme and sesame seeds.

5. CONCLUSION

Without a secure right to existence no Israeli government will risk to withdraw from the occupied territories. It will continue to rely on military strength. However, if we assume that it would be possible for the parties to the conflict to unequivocally confirm the recognition of the state of Israel, further progress could be made: in the form of a two-state solution based on the borders of 1967 and open and peaceful borders to all neighbouring countries.

If a peaceful agreement could be reached, the Near East would grow into one of the top tourism destinations of the world with enormous economic profit. That which is offered between Luxor and Aleppo, between the Mediterranean beaches and the Euphrates and Tigris regions is beyond comparison. It is the cultural and religious philosophical heritage of a great part of mankind.

In essence this means: If this desired situation of peaceful coexistence were to be achieved, the working methods and goals of the ALTERNATIVE TOURISM GROUP would become even more important and could serve as an example for others.

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APPENDIX

Excerpt from the security advice published by the German Foreign Office for travel to the Palestinian territories (**Status 14.02.2007**)

(...)

Security Advice:

Travel to the West Bank is generally discouraged.

Occasional shots are fired at passing vehicles on the streets of the West Bank. The cities of Jenin, Nablus, Hebron and Tulkarem are to be completely avoided.

On 02.02.2006 a German national fell victim to a flash kidnapping in Nablus. Since then, there have been other kidnappings of EU member state nationals, the last being the seizure of a French diplomat in early January.

In general, safe passage can not be assured for travel in and out of Palestinian territories (West Bank and Gaza Strip) even with the support of the German Embassy in Tel Aviv and the representation office in Ramallah. The staff of the representation office in Ramallah can not be reached there in the event of a city blockade, which generally occurs at very short notice. In this case, a contact telephone number for the staff is read out on the answering machine of the office. In cases of emergency outside working hours you can reach the stand-by emergency service (...).