



**The Abraham Path:
Experiential Tourism Across Fragile Communities in the West Bank**
Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim: Economic Development Across Fragile Communities
World Bank Project Number P147235
Research Note 1

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Introduction

The Abraham Path is a long-distance walking trail that traces the cultural memory of Abraham across the Middle East. The trail crosses parts of Turkey, Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel, and now comprises more than 1,000 kilometers of mapped and walkable routes. The World Bank-funded project *Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim: Economic Development Across Fragile Communities* seeks to stimulate job creation and income generation for marginalized rural communities along the Abraham Path in the West Bank.

The pilot project, which runs from January 2014 to March 2016, places a particular focus on women and youth groups, and includes an Action Research component aimed at capturing data, insights, and lessons learned from implementing such a project in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This paper, the first of a series of Action Research Notes, aims to introduce the project and set out the main research questions. Subsequent papers will address some of these research questions.

The Economy of the West Bank

The economy of the West Bank, hampered by years

of conflict and insecurity, depends largely on foreign aid, and the public sector is the largest employer. While it is imperative in the short term that donors continue to support the Palestinian Authority (PA) budget, and that the PA continues with its reform agenda, serious efforts must be made to look at medium-term measures that can reverse current negative trends and put the economy of the West Bank on a path to sustainable growth.

This must occur through efforts to promote private sector-led economic growth in the West Bank. This will necessarily depend upon increasing private investment to enable the PA to expand its tax base and eventually reduce its dependence on donor aid. Such growth will also create jobs and alleviate poverty. Tourism is a key sector of the economy in which these needs can be addressed.

Tourism in the West Bank and the Potential of the Abraham Path

The tourism industry in the West Bank has most of the necessary infrastructure, facilities, and attractions to make the West Bank a viable destination for foreign tourists. Both private and public sectors have been investing millions of dollars in developing and

The Abraham Path, Adventure Tourism, and Community-Based Tourism

As the first and only long-distance regional trail across the Middle East, the Abraham Path's great strength is its ability to provide truly unique adventures for travelers. Along its route, it affords opportunities for rock climbing, mountain trekking, trail running, mountain biking, and other activities that fall within the sphere of adventure tourism. This positions the Abraham Path within the adventure tourism sector, which is a quickly-growing dimension of the worldwide tourism economy. In 2014, adventure tourism represented a USD 263 billion global market.

At the same time, the Abraham Path is a community-based project that can operate within a specific walking-based alternative tourism niche in the West Bank. The Abraham Path is the largest of a series of walking-based projects that seek to benefit rural communities, including the Sufi Trails network near Birzeit, the nature trail outside Battir, and the Ramallah Highlands Trail. API and its local partners have striven to develop support and participation in local communities, to maximize economic benefits for those communities, and to promote cultural identity while protecting the natural environment.

The Abraham Path therefore functions within the matrix of NGO-supported and private-sector tourism projects aimed at developing the economy of the West Bank. Because it is situated at the intersection of adventure tourism, community-based tourism, and sustainable tourism, it appeals to a series of growing markets within the worldwide tourism economy, and has strong potential for providing income for Palestinians in rural communities, including women and youth.

upgrading the tourism industry. Between the years 2000 and 2009, the private sector invested close to 300 million USD into tourism in West Bank and Gaza. Over the past five years, key investments have included hotels, recreational parks and resorts, cultural centers, and new transportation fleets.ⁱ

However, the industry is not developed fully across the value chain, which causes leakages in tourism revenue. Of the more than 2 million foreign tourists who visited the West Bank in 2013, only about 600,000 stayed overnight.ⁱⁱ This is due to the fact that many tour operators use Jerusalem as a base for lodging, and bring tourists into the West Bank only for day trips to Bethlehem. For this reason, much investment has gone into making Bethlehem an independent tourism destination. However, the majority of hotel rooms and beds in the Bethlehem area remain unoccupied during most of the year.

The emphasis on Bethlehem also creates imbalances in the distribution of tourists across the West Bank. During the second quarter of 2014, almost half of the total guest nights in West Bank hotels were spent in the Bethlehem area.ⁱⁱⁱ Outside the main cities, small communities in rural areas remain excluded from mainstream tourist routes, and hardly benefit from tourist investments and promotion.

As a long-distance walking trail that aims to bring foreign travelers into rural areas across the West Bank, the Abraham Path is uniquely positioned to address imbalances in the Palestinian tourism economy, add diversity to that economy, and bring income to rural communities that rarely benefit from that economy. However, because trekking tourism is relatively new to the West Bank, API and its local partners face a number of challenges in developing the trail. In the framework of the World Bank-funded pilot project, these challenges can be addressed.

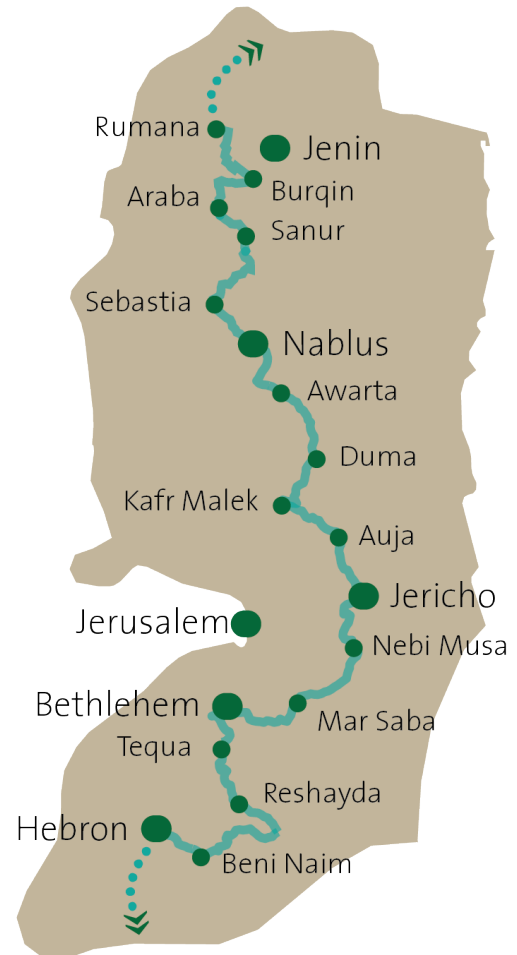
The Abraham Path, Its Partners in the West Bank, and the World Bank Project

The West Bank section of the Abraham Path, which is more than 265 kilometers long and connects 34 communities, is one of the most highly-developed segments of the trail. For each stage of the trail between Jenin and Hebron, travelers can download GPS tracks and print detailed maps from the API website, and they can use the services of local guides and homestays.

Much of the development along that section so far has taken place through local partner organizations. The Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil (MIAK) is a union of three Palestinian NGOs: the Palestine Wildlife Society, the Rozana Association, and the Siraj Center. MIAK is a member of the Network of Experiential Palestinian Tour Operators (NEPTO), which includes virtually all of the NGOs engaged in developing new community-based tourism projects. Bethlehem University is another local partner involved in training local trekking guides who will be the first of their kind to be certified by the PA Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

Much remains to be done, however. The World Bank Project *Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim: Economic Development Across Fragile Communities* has enabled API to continue working alongside local partners and local communities in constructing sustainable frameworks for trekking tourism in the West Bank. The Abraham Path is not only a hiking trail, but a whole network of people and businesses that links a series of towns, villages and Bedouin communities, and which facilitates tourist movement. To build up the activities of local partners is to build the trail itself, and therefore creates a win-win situation for API, MIAK, and people who live along the route. The four components of the project are aimed at deepening and widening this network along the corridor of the trail by training guides and service providers, developing infrastructure, marketing the trail, monitoring and evaluating progress, and so on.

Component I, *Investing in People and Institutions*, is aimed at building capacity and raising awareness within civil society (NGOs) and the public sector (especially local government authorities and communities). It is also aimed at training key local community stakeholders: walking guides and hosts of family homestays. Component II, *Path Development*, invests in trail mapping, GIS data collection, signage placement, and route extension in the northern and



southern sections of the West Bank. Component III, *Marketing, Business Development and Communication*, develops practical resources for travelers, engages with the global travel market, invests in including more tour operators in the project, and builds social media and marketing collateral for the path in the West Bank.

Component IV, *Action Research*, includes project monitoring and evaluation in addition to data collection and publication of Action Research Notes on the project. The research questions behind the Action Research Component, as well as the topics of the Research Notes, are discussed in more detail below.

Action Research Questions

Long-distance trekking as a form of adventure, pilgrimage or cultural tourism is no new phenomenon. A wide body of academic research (historical, socioeconomic, anthropological and other fields), popular books, documentaries, and fiction films explore the subject from various angles. However, as a form of community-based tourism in rural areas affected by conflict, the data and analysis are much more scarce. A number of research questions stand out and shape the Action Research component of this project.

1) *Economic questions:* From the perspective of economics and economic development, an overarching question is whether and how in a context of conflict, long-distance hiking can be a durable part of a country's tourism offering. What is the long-term economic potential of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim for Palestinian tourism? How does the supply chain of hiking tourism in the West Bank compare with that of other trekking destinations, and what are its strengths and weaknesses? Given the pioneering role of civil society in developing new forms of tourism, what is the role of more commercially-driven actors, such as tour operators, in increasing the number of visitors?

2) *Social questions:* From a sociological/social development perspective, questions are somewhat more wide-ranging. As a walking route across the West Bank, how has the Abraham Path fostered social cohesion between communities that have become disconnected because of challenges to movement? How do communities along the trail view themselves,

and how do they seek to present themselves to outsiders? How are two groups who often find themselves at the margins of economic development in the Arab world — women and youth — affected by this project, in which they play a central role?

3) *Infrastructure questions:* Certain infrastructural elements, such as campsites and waymarked routes, are common to most long-distance hiking trails around the world, but do not yet exist along trails in the West Bank. Is it necessary to develop the Abraham Path along the lines of other well-established hiking trails, or can GPS maps, trained guides and homestays replace paper maps, marked trails and campgrounds? How can local hikers and entrepreneurs take a long-term leadership role in developing and maintaining the infrastructure of the Abraham Path? Where can the Abraham Path and other trails fit into the larger scheme of Palestinian regional planning across the West Bank?

4) *Cultural questions:* By following the cultural memory of Abraham across the Middle East, the Abraham Path is fostering modern awareness of traditional stories, and helping prevent living traditions and oral histories from being forgotten. How can these stories be used to bring out a fuller picture of conflict-affected communities and their traditions, heritage and culture of hospitality? What aspects of the larger Abraham story hold either universal or group-specific appeal for travelers, hosts, guides and other stakeholders? What lessons can be learned from other trail projects that rely heavily on the power of story?

Gathering and Analyzing the Data

To gather the information that will enable API to answer these questions, API is employing a number of methodologies. First, API and its local partners have kept data for several years on the number of tours that have taken place along the trail, with the number of participants in each. Furthermore, API and its partners have conducted a number of surveys over

the years aimed at determining the needs and desires of foreign travelers, and their assessment of the quality and costs associated with hiking the trail.

Additional survey data will be necessary in order to determine questions related to social development. A research firm will help API conduct surveys across rural communities in the West Bank lying on or near the path, and individual consultants will apply their academic and practical expertise to answering technology and anthropology-related questions.

Exploring New Terrain

One of the most exciting dimensions of this research project is that few trails around the world have been studied with this level of detail. A large body of literature exists on adventure tourism, but few studies have looked specifically at hiking trails as avenues of travel within that sector. Similarly, studies on waymarking and the creation of a visible and sustainable walking route will be useful for subsequent similar projects that take place in the Middle East and around the world.

The Abraham Path offers a new model for community-based tourism in this region. Because of its length and the number of countries in which it exists, the trail connects a large number of rural communities across the whole of the Middle East, not just in the West Bank. The information gleaned through the Action Research component of the World Bank grant will enable API and its local partners to incorporate lessons learned during the course of the

project, and will be used later to spur economic development in the communities along the trail.

Finally, by making this information widely accessible, other tourist walking routes can similarly apply these lessons, particularly in the Middle East. The corridor of the Abraham Path takes advantage of some of the natural beauty and historic significance that can be found in the region, but much space exists outside that corridor for further development of adventure and community-based tourism. The Abraham Path has the potential to serve as the spine of a larger network of long-distance trails that cross the Middle East, tracing the ancient lines of trade routes and religious pilgrimage. Should such a network begin to take shape, the findings of this research project will help mark the way.

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The API Research Notes are intended to summarize research results and lessons learned through the Action Research Component of World Bank Project No. P147235, and do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank, its board, or its member countries.

Endnotes

ⁱ Master Plan for Developing Tourism in Bethlehem, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, "Main Indicators for Hotel Activities in the West Bank by Region and Quarter, 2013," http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/Rainbow/Documents/Hotel_an_e_%20tab9-2013.htm; accessed November 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, "Main Indicators for Hotel Activities by Month and Region During the Second Quarter, 2014," <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/Rainbow/Documents/h-q2-e-tab1-2014.htm>; accessed November 2014.