



Blazing a Palestinian Hiking Trail Network: Challenges and Possibilities

Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim: Economic Development Across Fragile Communities

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Research Note 6

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Waymarking is one of the last remaining key steps in the realization of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim as a trail-based hiking tourism project. The placement of blazes – symbols that appear alongside a walking route as navigational aids for hikers – is a common element of well-known and well-traveled hiking trails worldwide.¹

To date, the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim has been an unmarked walking route, navigable primarily by way of locally-hired guides. The lack of waymarking has limited the trail's visibility on the ground, and it has also limited popular awareness of the trail's existence. Based on the observed effects of waymarking internationally, and even elsewhere in the West Bank, the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim, once marked, will be more accessible to visitors, and will attract larger numbers of local and foreign hikers.

Placing marks of any sort upon the ground in the West Bank, where control over territory is often highly contested, can be a complicated matter. If the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is indeed to become a fully-blazed hiking trail, akin to long-distance hiking trails all over the globe, the work must be done carefully, with due attention to the area's unique complexities.

At the same time, if the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is to reach its full potential as a Palestinian corridor of movement, the question of waymarking should not just deal with this single trail. It should leave open the possibility that an entire network of similar trails could develop across the West Bank – a sort of circulatory system carrying travelers on foot



Above: Trail blaze along the GR-11 trail in Spain. Waymarking keeps hikers safe, protects nature, and makes trails visible to people who use them and who live near them. (Photo: David Landis)

across the body of Palestinian territory, from its core to its farthest extremities.

Such a network would function as an inexpensive, lightweight, and low-maintenance transportation network that connects Areas A, B, and C of the West Bank in a way that few other Palestinian infrastructure projects currently can.² It would also serve to connect urban and rural areas, encourage outdoor walking as a healthy mode of recreation, and foster deeper engagement between Palestinian communities and the surrounding natural environment.

Through the community-based efforts of the Abraham Path Initiative (API) and its local partner organization, Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil (MIAK), the foundations necessary for building a Palestinian hiking trail system now exist. That groundwork is

described in other publications, including the other Research Notes in this series.

Waymarking, however, remains a necessary step for realizing the establishment of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim as a hiking trail and a tourism offering. Waymarking can only succeed with proper planning and organization, particularly in a sensitive area like the West Bank. Building on the API/MIAK body of knowledge and experience, this paper addresses the key challenges facing Palestinian waymarking in the West Bank and makes recommendations for action.

Envisioning a Palestinian trail network

Defining and mapping the exact areas in which a Palestinian hiking trail network could spread is a large task whose details lie outside the scope of this paper. Generally, the growth and development of a Palestinian trail network will be defined by a few major factors: where people want to hike, where people are physically able to travel, and where people can travel safely.

Adventure tourists are most attracted to rural areas outside cities and away from intensive development.³ However, since most rural areas in the West Bank are controlled by Israel, the trail network will have to avoid Israeli-constructed barriers to free Palestinian movement, such as highways, military bases, firing zones, and nature reserves. Because of potential safety issues, it will also have to avoid areas of high Israeli presence, including settlements and some Israeli-marked trails that connect settlements with popular hiking destinations.

These concerns limit the available space for Palestinian hiking, but much room remains for growth. In some areas where settlements are sparse, marked Palestinian walking routes have already taken shape. Local hiking clubs have also defined some unmarked routes that have become quite popular, and which would be logical to incorporate into a marked Palestinian trail network.

Waymarking should begin along the north-south corridor of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim, where much of the groundwork for creating a safe and sustainable hiking trail has already been laid. That trail could serve as a central corridor of movement, with side routes branching out to offer access to other well-established routes, and popular Palestinian hiking and tourism destinations.

Community involvement in waymarking

Palestinians should be in charge of marking Palestinian hiking trails. In the beginning, foreign experts can train local guides and hikers in field techniques and international standards for waymarking.⁴ The best candidates for training would be expert MIAK-trained guides, as well as the leaders of local Palestinian hiking clubs. Once trained, these guides and experienced hikers could facilitate the creation of the marked trail network, starting with the Abraham Path and moving outward across the West Bank.

However, if the actual work stays solely in the hands of guides and elite hikers, a great opportunity for community involvement could be lost. Many people in communities near the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim are either unaware of the trail's existence, or do not have a good idea of its exact route. Training volunteers from such communities for waymarking projects would be an excellent way to introduce these communities to the Abraham Path, and to build a pool of volunteers who could mark the larger network.

Hands-on trail work would familiarize Palestinians with recreational hiking, trail blazes, the use of blazes as navigational aids, and the potential positive economic impact of marked trails near businesses. It would heighten the local sense of ownership over hiking trails, and create possibilities for locally-led maintenance frameworks in the future.

Before considering the specific marking system best suited for the West Bank and ways of maintaining the trail network, it is worth first examining factors that could threaten Palestinian trails before they have a chance to become popular. Waymarking should not take place if it causes problems that hinder or prevent the completion of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and other trails connected to it.

Preventing trails from being erased

Erasure and manipulation of blazes and trail signs is a problem for trail-planners worldwide. While vandalism can never be completely prevented, especially in remote and difficult-to-police areas, practical measures can be taken to keep waymarking in place across the West Bank, and to minimize the threats that come from different directions.

The SPNI is Israel's largest environmental NGO, and sees itself as having a mandate to protect nature

in all areas currently under Israeli sovereignty, including Area C of the West Bank. Part of that mandate involves maintaining a large and uniformly-marked hiking trail network, and erasing trails that conflict with that network.

Trails marked using Israeli/SPNI-style blazes are viewed as confusing to hikers, because such trails do not appear on the SPNI-produced topographical maps that are standard tools in Israel's hiking community. The SPNI has erased trails marked by Palestinians on more than one occasion. However, most of the trails the SPNI erases in the West Bank are actually created by settlers.

Regardless of their provenance, such trails are erased when encountered in the field by SPNI waymarking teams. One way to avoid this problem is to establish discreet contact with field personnel from the SPNI, and make the organization aware that a new Palestinian trail network is being marked responsibly and in accordance with international guidelines.⁵ Another is to make sure Palestinian trail blazes are clearly distinguishable from Israeli trail blazes (see next section).

The activities of Israeli settlers in response to the creation of marked Palestinian hiking trails should be considered as well, but are more difficult to predict. Such activities will likely depend largely on where Palestinian trails are marked, and whether trail markings and signage are perceived as assertions of control over contested territory.

Erasure of blazes can also be an issue from the Palestinian side. Some Palestinians who farm or own land near hiking trails have encountered waymarks, perceived them as threats to their ownership or control over territory, and have erased them.⁶ The best ways to avoid this are for waymarking personnel to operate in the open, actively engage residents of areas near trails, and maintain a prominent local presence.

Municipalities and community organizations should approve and be aware of waymarking projects, but individuals living near trails should also be notified, either in advance, or by volunteers involved in waymarking efforts as they takes place. If waymarking is well-publicized within communities, both beforehand and on the days when marking takes place in the field, perhaps by large groups of volunteers moving along the trail, local residents can learn about the purpose of the markings, and take a leading role in preserving them.

Character and placement of blazes

The shapes, sizes, and color of the blazes that appear along Palestinian trails must be carefully determined, given the above-described need to differentiate Palestinian trails from Israeli trails. Since the goal of waymarking is to create a system of navigational aids that keep people safe and highlight the existence of the trail network, it is also important that the blazes be inexpensive, easy to place by volunteers, and durable in local weather conditions.

From a sustainability perspective, iconic and simply-shaped blazes, painted directly onto permanent and semi-permanent surfaces alongside trails (rocks, trees, signposts, walls), seem to be the best option. Complicated shapes, stenciled marks, and lettering are cost- and time-prohibitive to place and maintain, in part because of rough trailside surfaces that do not lend themselves to detail work. Signs, tiles, and plaques can be difficult to affix, and are easily defaced or destroyed.

From a political perspective, and with sustainability still in mind, a waymarking scheme with painted blazes similar to that of the European GR system (two horizontally-oriented stripes, as shown in the photo on Page 1) would be well-suited for the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and other Palestinian trails.⁷ It would be different enough from the Israeli system (three vertically-oriented stripes) to ensure that the SPNI would not mistake Palestinian trails for unauthorized "pirate trails" that could confuse hikers.

For long main routes in the network like the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim, red/white blazes would be in line with the international GR scheme, and would be highly visible in the field during all seasons and weather conditions. Side trails could be marked with green/white blazes and black/white blazes.

Sustainability is also important to consider when planning trailhead and junction signage. The character of signage near development projects in the West Bank is often determined by the political concerns of outside governments and NGOs. In the case of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and other trails, given the sensitivity of marking in the Israeli-controlled Area C, and given the necessity of keeping hikers safe, all such concerns should be put aside.

While trail blazes, as non-textual signs, are relatively non-threatening to people of different backgrounds and political persuasions, text-based signs are often perceived as statements, and certain languages (particularly Arabic and Hebrew) tend to be erased. English is the *lingua franca* best understood by API, MIAK, Palestinians, and international hikers. Other languages may be included as well, but should be prioritized according to the needs of trail users.

Moreover, trail signs should be as simple, clear, and discreet as possible, so as to foster hiker safety and avoid blighting the natural landscape. Trailhead signs should list, at maximum, the names of section beginning and ending points, the amount of time hikers should reasonably expect to be on the trail, and any necessary safety information.

Other field practices can also render Palestinian trails more viable, both in terms of their ability to remain in place once marked, and in terms of their relationships with their surrounding environments. A number of Palestinian hiking trails are already known, mapped, and publicized, waymarking teams should take care to place blazes along their exact routes. Alterations in the field should be avoided.

The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim, for example, has been mapped and publicized by API, and is well known and traveled by MIAK and unaffiliated guides. That trail's route has been established through careful work over a period of several years, and altering the route arbitrarily could threaten nature, hiker safety, and the viability of the trail.

Once the main Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim route is marked, side trails to nearby destinations should be marked with differently-colored blazes. If the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is marked in red/white, for example, side trails could be marked in green/white or black/white. Where side trails depart from main junctions, signage could alert travelers to side trails' destinations.

Waymarking in sensitive areas

The waymarking plan for the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and other Palestinian trails should take into account the locations of Israeli nature reserves, and plan to leave trails unmarked in such areas. The Israeli Nature Reserves Authority closely monitors activities on the ground and changes to the environment, and can fine or prosecute people for carrying out unauthorized activities. Attempting to

mark trails within a nature reserve could have consequences for the entire waymarking effort.

Furthermore, marking should be carried out with discretion in places where Palestinian trails might overlap existing Israeli-marked trails. It may be possible to place Palestinian blazes intermittently along such trails as long as it avoids undue attention. In areas like Hebron, marking should be carried out with discretion and extreme caution, if at all, given the inherent tensions related to the location, the presence of IDF soldiers, and the close proximity of highly ideologically-motivated Israeli settlers who have gone to great lengths to remove signs of Palestinian presence.

If waymarking is to take place in such areas, international teams of volunteers might make such efforts more secure. In light of such concerns, publicity for waymarking efforts should be directed to local Palestinian communities, not to media outlets that could draw negative attention to Palestinian trails.

Israeli-marked trails in Area C of the West Bank have sometimes been scenes of confrontation between Israeli settlers and Palestinian hikers. If possible, attention from settlers should be avoided, in order to prevent trail blazes from being erased, and in order to keep trail users safe. Ideally, waymarking should make Palestinian communities more aware of trails that pass nearby, but it should not draw undue attention from settlers.

Short-term and long-term maintenance

To maintain marked trails in the short term, the trained guides facilitating waymarking efforts should revisit the trail sections they have marked within four weeks after the blazes are painted in the field, and should be prepared to repaint blazes where necessary. In the event of the blazes' erasure, the blazes should be repainted, and their locations should be noted.

If possible, guides should determine causes of erasure, speak with the parties likely responsible, and work to heighten local understanding of trails, their purposes, and the benefits they offer communities. Guides should continue making periodic visits – every month or so – until the blazes stay in place. After that, guides and hiking club leaders should continue to monitor sections in the course of hikes.

The most sustainable long-term maintenance framework will be centered on intensive community involvement. This can begin with the first waymarking efforts. After involving local communities in waymarking, volunteer participants can stay connected with the trail, which will now be visible on the ground, and more accessible to Palestinian hikers.

Momentum should be directed toward the eventual establishment of a sort of Abraham Path Conservancy – a non-profit group that draws on the experiences of other worldwide hiking trails to channel volunteer effort into waymarking, trail improvement, cleanup, and so on. Such a long-term maintenance scheme turns local communities into allies and advocates of Palestinian trails, and will allow trails across the West Bank to thrive.

Conclusions

Waymarking the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is a key step in the development of the trail, and creates the possibility for a whole system of Palestinian hiking trails to take shape. Creating such a network in turn creates the possibility for the social and economic benefits of trail-based hiking tourism to spread beyond the corridor of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim. However, an ill-conceived waymarking project could create more problems than it solves.

A well-planned waymarking project for the West Bank should be centered around a blazing system that is well-suited for the region's physical and political environment. It should be implemented by the Palestinian communities that lie near the trails, under the leadership of local hiking guides who are familiar with field waymarking practices. Once put in place, it should be long-lasting, and supported by a maintenance framework that continually engages local volunteers.

Waymarking and trail maintenance can emerge naturally from local cultures of hiking, as in the case of myriad trail development projects in the United States and Europe. On the other hand, they can greatly contribute to the development of a local culture of hiking, and can create conditions favorable for an influx of foreign visitors.

Whether marked trails produce hikers or hikers produce marked trails, then, is a sort of chicken-or-egg question. In the case of the West Bank, the work of API and MIAK has contributed to the rise of a local culture of hiking, which now offers a natural starting point for waymarking. As trails and their blazes become more visible on the ground, people of all ages will enjoy more access to the rural West Bank, thus broadening the base of Palestinian hiking culture, and continuing the cycle in which local hiking and trail development push each other forward.

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¹ See Shay Rabineau and Sini Poytaniemi, 2014. The supply chain of trail-based hiking tourism in the West Bank. Research note 2.

² Under the 1993 Oslo Accords, the West Bank is divided into three areas: Area A, which covers major population centers and is under Palestinian security and civilian control; Area B, which covers mostly rural communities and is under Palestinian civil authority and some security control, with overall security remaining under Israeli control; and Area C, which covers most rural areas and is under Israeli control for both civil and security affairs, including land administration and planning.

³ Global report on adventure tourism, 2014. UN World Trade Organization and Adventure Travel Trade Association.

⁴ At the time of this writing, the France-based Tetraktys organization has been training the MIAK staff in waymarking and conducted some waymarking in the southern part of the path. API is planning waymarking activities for the spring 2016 in the north.

⁵ Within the SPNI, the Israel Trails Committee (ITC) is responsible for marking, mapping, and maintaining Israeli hiking trails. The ITC's small field staff of 4-5 people can be contacted through the main SPNI office in Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁶ A) Mohammad Atari, interview with Shay Rabineau, Jenin, Palestine, March 2015. B) First hand experiences during way-marking efforts by MIAK in the southern West Bank, June 2015.

⁷ For details on the GR waymarking system, see Fédération française de la randonnée pédestre, *La Charte Officielle du Balisage et de la Signalisation* (Paris: FFRandonee, 2006), 38-55.