



The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and Palestinian Spatial Planning: From Rumana to Hebron

Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim: Economic Development Across Fragile Communities

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Research Note 5

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Underlying the many potential social and economic dimensions of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is its physical route: the trail on the ground that connects Palestinian communities across the West Bank. In the process of determining that physical route, the Abraham Path Initiative (API) and Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil (MIAK) have conducted enormous amounts of field research. Sites traditionally connected with Abraham have been uncovered; little-known tourism assets in rural communities have been brought to light; and hiker-friendly walking routes have been recorded and mapped.

In order to effectively and responsibly develop the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim in the future, however, more information regarding the trail corridor is necessary. Where does the trail cross administrative boundaries, and which governmental entities should API and MIAK approach as they work to develop different sections of the trail? How is the land along the trail corridor being used, and how environmentally sensitive is that land? What types of social centers exist along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim, and what bearing might they have on a larger spatial plan for the trail?

Beginning with an examination of the recorded route of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim between its northern terminus near Jenin and its southern terminus in Hebron, this paper analyzes the trail in the framework of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data on land cover and urban development in the West Bank. It takes a close look at the character of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim, paying special attention to the trail's surroundings, including the natural

environment, nearby urban centers, and the Palestinian spatial plans that encompass both.

At the time this analysis took place, the mapped route of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim began in Rumana, north of Jenin, and ended in Hebron. Since then, a new section of the trail, comprising 58 kilometers, has been added to the trail south of Hebron. At the time of this writing, maps and atlases for the new southern section are not yet available to the public. This analysis therefore focuses on the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim from Rumana to Hebron.

The Abraham Path from Rumana to Hebron

Perhaps the most unique feature of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is that it constitutes a single, unbroken line across the whole of the West Bank. The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim from Rumana to Hebron has a total length of 286 kilometers. Most Palestinian development projects are limited to the small areas under Palestinian control, and cannot extend across the wider spaces of the West Bank currently under Israeli control.

As a soft infrastructure project that leaves a minimal imprint on the ground, the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim has successfully established itself as a corridor of movement that connects Palestinian communities from north to south. However, if hard infrastructure becomes necessary for attracting and sustaining larger numbers of visitors, any construction will likely be limited to Palestinian-controlled areas A and B.

The Israeli-controlled Area C covers about 61 percent of the West Bank, including most rural areas of particular interest to hikers seeking experiences with nature. Based on this, one might expect the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim to reflect the character of its surroundings: 67 percent of the route crossing Area C, and only 33 percent crossing the Palestinian-controlled Areas A and B. However, this is not the case.

Much of the trail is indeed rural, and keeps its distance from some major urban centers, including Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Qalqilya. At the same time, though, it passes through several of the West Bank's major cities, including Nablus, Jericho, Bethlehem, and Hebron, and comes close to the northern city of Jenin. This keeps the trail within large stretches of Areas A and B.

In the end, almost half of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim – 49 percent – lies within Palestinian-controlled areas. 42 percent lies within the Israeli-controlled Area C. Nine percent is designated as nature reserve land under international agreements, but lies under de facto Israeli control. This means almost half of the trail can be developed with relative freedom, as long as such development works alongside Palestinian spatial plans and is approved by the relevant authorities.

Between Rumana and Hebron, the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim traverses seven of the West Bank's eleven governorates. The Hebron governorate surrounds about 20 percent of the trail (58 kilometers). The Jenin, Nablus, and Bethlehem governorates each surround about 18 percent (about 50 kilometers each) of the trail. The remainder of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim lies within the Jericho governorate (37 kilometers), the Ramallah governorate (33 kilometers) and the Jerusalem governorate (6 kilometers).

API and MIAK are already working alongside these governorates to develop the trail. These governorates, however, working under the Palestinian Authority (PA), have little influence in Israeli-controlled Area C. To date, this has not created problems, because visible infrastructure development along the trail has been minimal. As steps like waymarking and sign placement proceed, ensuring uniformity across Israeli-controlled and Palestinian-controlled areas may be difficult. Similarly, maintaining an integrated spatial development agenda for the whole of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim will likely present challenges for API and MIAK.

Land Use and Land Cover

Analyzing the land use and land cover of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim corridor gives trail planners a baseline measurement of conditions on the ground. It offers a sense of the areas of natural beauty that lie within sight of the trail, and may serve to attract hikers. It also highlights environmentally-sensitive areas, and can show where human development should or should not leave its mark. This analysis covers a one-kilometer-wide corridor (0.5 kilometers on each side of the trail) along the length of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim from Rumana to Hebron.

The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim predominantly consists of “open spaces with little or no vegetation,” and “pastures.” Other classifications appear frequently as well, especially “permanent crops,” “heterogeneous agricultural areas,” and “arable land.” These land use/cover classes suggest the potential of the trail.

In the southern governorates of Bethlehem and Hebron, the dominant classes are ‘open spaces with little or no vegetation’ and ‘pastures’, but these classes are not uniformly distributed. In the Bethlehem governorate, more than 52 percent of the land is designated as “pastures,” and less than 15 percent of the land is designated as “open spaces with little or no vegetation.” In the Hebron governorate, the predominant class is “open spaces with little or no vegetation” at 38 percent, and “pastures” following closely at 35 percent.

In the middle governorates of Jerusalem and Ramallah, there is a single dominant class. In Jerusalem governorate, about 95 percent of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim route is surrounded by “pastures.” However, in the Ramallah governorate, the dominant class is “open spaces with little or no vegetation,” which covers more than 65 percent of the trail corridor. The middle governorates of Jerusalem and Ramallah offer less variety in terms of land use/cover classifications compared with the southern governorates of Bethlehem and Hebron. Nevertheless, the southern and middle governorates remain heavily dominated by two classes, namely: “open spaces with little or no vegetation,” and “pastures.”

In the northern governorates of Nablus and Jenin, new classes are more predominant, compared with the southern and middle governorates. In the Nablus governorate, about 44 percent of the trail corridor is designated as “permanent crops,” and about 14 percent is designated as “arable land.” In the Jenin governorate, about 38 percent is designated as “permanent crops,” and 20 percent is designated as “open spaces with little or no vegetation.”

In the Jordan River Valley, and in the Jericho governorate more specifically, only four percent of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim corridor is designated as “open spaces with little or no vegetation”; about 15 percent is designated as “arable land” suitable for agricultural purposes; and more than 45 percent is designated as “heterogeneous agricultural areas”.

Given all this, the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim corridor offers certain opportunities in terms of land. The available land for future spatial development along the entire trail amounts to about 78,000 dunams. The distribution of the available land is mostly located in the southern governorates of Bethlehem and Hebron, which have almost 45 percent of the total available area along the trail corridor. The northern governorates of Jenin and Nablus have almost one-third of the available land. The middle governorates of Jerusalem and Ramallah have less than 13 percent of the available land, while the Jericho governorate has less than 10 percent. However, the suitable land in terms of water sensitivity, soil type, climatology, and topography out of the available land for future spatial development is less than 62,000 dunams.

Based on this analysis of the nature of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim corridor, it would make sense to maintain only soft infrastructure projects, since in terms of ecological sensitivity, many of the available

areas for future spatial development are stretched to the limit. Soft infrastructure projects would include encouraging hiking and walking along the trail corridor, and developing tourism-related projects that benefit local residents and capitalize on the main resources available in Palestinian communities.

The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and the Provision of Services

As mentioned, the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim comes into contact with different types of urban centers across the West Bank. Such centers can be important hubs for providing necessary services to hikers, such as resupplying and lodging. At the same time, these centers are hubs for providing social services to local residents. The spatial relationship between the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and the prevailing hierarchy of social services is of importance for trail users (to date, mainly foreign visitors) and community beneficiaries (mainly local residents) alike.

Within the West Bank’s eleven governorates, there exist three regional centers, ten sub-regional centers, 22 local centers, and 22 neighborhood centers.ⁱ Regional centers host facilities such as hospitals, universities, hotels, and cultural institutions. Sub-regional centers host colleges, medical clinics, local administrative offices, supermarkets, and banks. Local centers offer services like primary and secondary schools, small grocery stores, and so on.ⁱⁱ

Table 1: West Bank social centers accessed by the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim

| Governorate | Community Center | Center Type | | | |
|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| | | Regional Center | Sub-regional Center | Local Center | Neighborhood Center |
| Nablus | Nablus | √ | | | |
| | Aqraba | | | √ | |
| | Sabastiya | | | √ | |
| Jericho | Jericho | | √ | | |
| | Ras 'Ein al 'Auja | | | | √ |
| Bethlehem | Bethlehem | | √ | | |
| | Beit Sahour | | | √ | |
| Hebron | Hebron | √ | | | |

When the route of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is plotted in relation to these centers and juxtaposed with data on the distribution of social services in the West Bank, we see that the trail route traverses about 14 percent of the total number of social service centers in the West Bank (Table 1).

The promotion of sub-centers to provide better services for the users, as well as better socio-economic benefits for the beneficiaries, would contribute to the trail’s sustainability. As mentioned earlier, the trail corridor is underserved with social services in the middle governorates of Jerusalem and Ramallah that have many significant touristic and archeological sites that could be used to provide better services to the users of the Path, and to contribute to the development of community centers in the West Bank, is Kafr Malik, a village in the Ramallah governorate that is located along the trail corridor, near Wadi Auja and about six kilometers southeast of Turmus’ayya, a local center in the Ramallah governorate.

Corridor Development: Urban-Rural Linkages

More than 240,000 people live along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim corridor. The average population density along the trail is 848 people per square kilometer. The gross population density across the West Bank, in comparison, is only a little more than half of that – 468 people per square kilometer.

The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim goes through 53 communities in the West Bank (Figure 1). Most of those communities, however, are small rural communities whose populations add up to about 60,000 people, or 25 percent of the total population along the trail corridor. At the same time, the Path traverses only six urban communitiesⁱⁱⁱ with a total population of 163,000 inhabitants, i.e. 68 percent of the total population. The remaining two communities are refugee camps, namely: Balata and Ein Beit el Mai camps in Nablus governorate with a total population of about 19,000 inhabitants. In short, the local population along the trail is not evenly distributed, but concentrated primarily in a few built-up areas.

The distribution and types of the communities along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim show great potential for spatial development in terms of linking rural and urban communities together. This does not necessarily entail constructing new communities along the

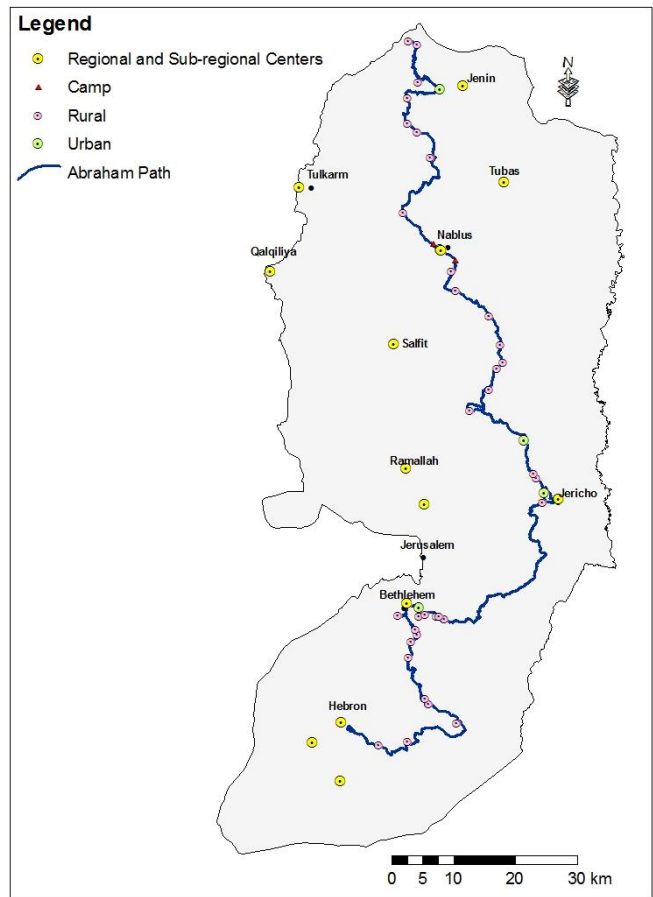


Figure 1: Corridor development along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim

Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim, but it could result in introducing promising projects, such as eco-lodges, mobile caravans, and so on that would eventually encourage tourist activities, increase local Palestinian engagement in the tourism sector, and make that sector more resilient overall.

In terms of spatial planning, the communities along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim would eventually benefit from the trail, since it would encourage their natural expansion along pre-defined corridors that better link the urban centers with the neighboring rural communities. The future expansion of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim’s 44 communities could include infrastructure development along the trail, as deemed appropriate from the standpoint of environmental sustainability.

Localizing the trail: the case of Kafr Malik

Kafr Malik is a small Palestinian village, about 14 kilometers southeast of Ramallah, the administrative

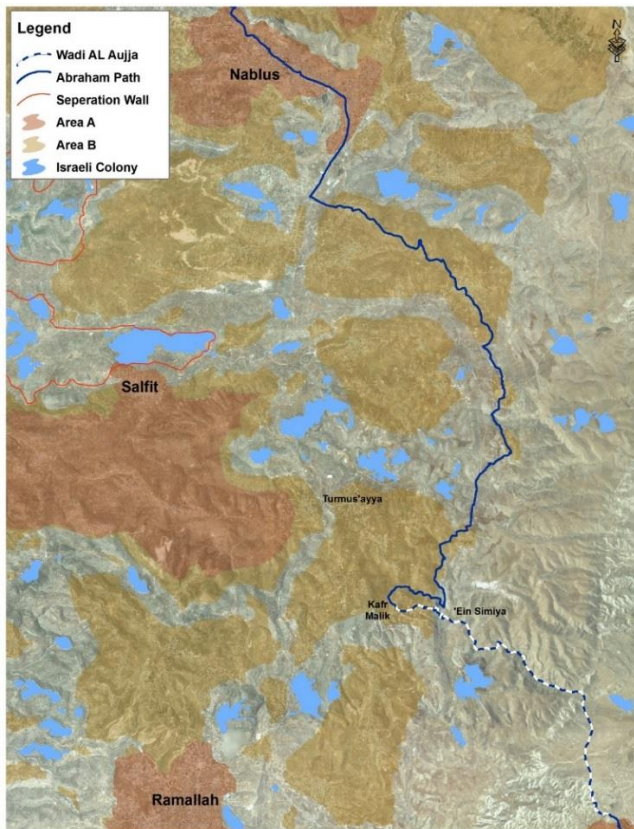


Figure 2: The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim and Kafr Malik

capital of the PA. Kafr Malik has 2,787 inhabitants who constitute 561 families and 664 housing units. More than 50 percent of the Kafr Malik labor force works within the agriculture sector.^{iv}

Land ownership in Kafr Malik stretches over 52,000 dunams, 87 percent of which is designated as Area C, while the remaining 13 percent is designated as Area B, where the bulk of inhabitants are located. The Israeli authorities have confiscated about 700 dunams from the village's lands to construct military bases and the Kokhav ha-Shahar Israeli settlement that was established in 1977, along with the Mitzpe Kramim Israeli outpost, built in 1999 to further expand the settlement. In short, Kafr Malik suffers from many geopolitical constraints, like the Israeli-designated roads 458 and 449 that bypass Palestinian communities and link the Israeli settlements together and beyond with Israel proper.^v

Promoting Kafr Malik as a neighborhood center would create leverage to upgrade the weak economic conditions in the village by introducing hiking activities along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim corridor, and also to provide better social services to the village and its neighboring communities (Figure 2). The Samiya spring and nearby Wadi Auja are among the natural elements that would strengthen the

experience of hiking along the trail. Treating Kafr Malik as an emergent neighborhood center would bring together a number of infrastructure projects and services that would provide better development opportunities for the village and its hinterland.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Spatial planning in the West Bank is complex, and has a fragmented history. Now, Palestinian planning practices are necessary that reflect and respond to geopolitical facts on the ground. In this light, the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim represents much more than a typical tourism offering. The trail has the potential to forge connections across a divided place that is fraught with many uncertainties due to the West Bank geopolitical situation. The trail could even be used as a means of defending the right to movement between Palestinian communities, and increasing mobility conditions for Palestinians.

Additional possibilities exist for future trail development. The Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim could be used as a tool within a decentralized system of extending national guidelines related to social services and hierarchy of centers in the West Bank. The Path should be socio-spatially constructed – that is, to have a robust spatial planning agenda while maintaining a rapport with the local residents. This would highlight some issues of concern, while others would be relegated to the background. One salient example is urban sprawl that could be curbed by maintaining harmonious urban-rural linkages along well-defined corridors of spatial development.

Spatial development associated with the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim should be environmentally sensitive, since the suitable land out of the available land for future spatial development is stretched to the limit. More specifically, the Path should be maintained as a tool to encourage soft infrastructural projects that go along with the purpose of the trail, including tourism activities, hiking, trekking, and so on.

Since more than half of the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim is located under full Israeli control, Palestinian plans for the trail across the West Bank will be always subject to prior Israeli approvals. This means coordinated efforts are necessary for developing the trail, preferably through third parties with equal interest in building the trail for the benefit of Israelis and Palestinians. Examples of such third parties include the World Bank, UNESCO, and API itself.

More detailed studies will be needed to clearly understand the economic benefits for local inhabitants, who could initiate local economic development projects along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim. The Path, as a national tourism asset and

ⁱ See Ministry of Planning (MoP) (2007). Defining Spatial Structure for Public Service Centers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip - A Conceptual Framework. Ramallah: MoP.

ⁱⁱ MoP, 2007: 74.

ⁱⁱⁱ Beit Sahour, Birqin, Ein ad Duyuk at Tahta, Jericho, al 'Auja, and Nablus communities.

^v Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem (ARIJ) (2012). Kafr Malik Village Profile. Bethlehem: ARIJ.

^v Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). (2007). Population, Housing and Establishment. Ramallah: PCBS.

infrastructure project, should be better linked with the Palestinian National Spatial Plan currently in preparation.

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