

West Bank Tour Changes Israelis' Minds towards Palestine

2013-03-03 21:50:29 [CRIENGLISH.com](#) Web Editor: Yangyang



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Construction site in Rawabi, the first Palestinian planned city, in this photo taken on Saturday, February 23, 2013. [Photo: [CRIENGLISH.com/Zhang Jin](#)]

By CRI Jerusalem correspondent Zhang Jin

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Being separated from Palestinian-controlled areas for a long time, many Israelis have harbored a great desire to see what's happening in the West Bank. Recent tours there for some have given them new, first-hand experiences of the area and those who live there.

During a recent tour to Rawabi, Ramallah and Kafr' Aqab, many Israelis say the realities in the West Bank have changed their minds about Palestine.

The tour, organized by the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information, or IPCRI, is part of the organization's "Breaking Down the Walls" tour series to take Israelis to the West Bank. Rimam Barakat, IPCRI's Palestinian co-director, says such tours are important because they challenge the perceptions of people on both sides.

"There is a lack of awareness on the Israeli side and part of the Israeli public regarding what's going on the Palestinian side, and in the West Bank there is also like almost no interaction between Palestinians and Israelis. This is a way to bring Israelis to see the realities on the Palestinian side, both negative and positive."

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The last time many Israelis were in the West Bank was decades ago when they used to shop there on a continual basis and do business with Palestinians. Therefore, when visiting Rawabi nowadays, most Israelis are surprised.

As the first city designed and administered by Palestinians themselves, Rawabi offers its residents a different standard of living. The planned 23 neighborhoods, town center and all related facilities such as schools, commercial areas and medical centers make Rawabi a comprehensive city. With affordable prices, more than half of the first six neighborhoods have been reserved, and the first residents are expected to move in around the end of this year.

Sixty-year-old Lee Siegel used to be a soldier serving in the West Bank many years ago, but he never returned after completing his tour of duty. He now says he is impressed by the city's prospects.

"I think like most people who live in Israel for too long, we have this imaginary understanding of what the West Bank is. The (Jewish) settlements are very pretty, and the Palestinian villages are not developed. (But) this is much more developed than what I've guessed."

And not just perceptions of the Palestinians' life have changed for the Israeli participants. The tour also breaks the psychological barrier of entering a Palestinian territory where signs at checkpoints warn that going into the West Bank is a dangerous risk to Israelis' lives and a criminal offense under Israeli law.

It has been 30 years since 56-year-old Aaron Weingrod last visited the West Bank, where he used to ride a motorcycle with his girlfriend on their trips to Bethlehem and Hebron to meet Palestinian friends for a coffee without having to worry about security.

"One of the very important things is it brings down the level of fear, which is the most basic thing that both countries have to get rid of, because that is what is stopping most normal people from recognizing each other, and both countries have been using it to keep people apart. Even though there are crazy things happening on every side, the majority of people, I think, are too tired already and want to finish that."

The tour also takes Israelis to Arafat's Tomb and the Mahmoud Darwish Museum of the most famous Palestinian poet in Ramallah. Crossing through Ramallah's city center by bus, which is usually off limits to Israelis, makes the visitors extremely excited. They also visit Kafr Aqab, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem that remains separated from the other parts of the city by the Israeli West Bank barrier. The residents are therefore cut off from most public services by either Israeli or Palestinian authorities.

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