




# Rediscovering Palestine

## Land of Our Forefathers, Country Hikes, and Selfies



By Ali Qleibo

“Stay home and eat *maqlubeh*. I am going out for a hike.” This is the catchy epithet that one ardent hiker wrote as the title of his post advocating his choice to spend Fridays out in nature rather than at home eating the traditional Palestinian Friday dish. Country hikes are a social phenomenon that has reconditioned the relationship of

Palestinians from all walks of life with themselves and with their ecological, cultural, and historical patrimony in the land of their ancestors. An upsurge in organized thematic tours, scenic strolls, scouting hikes, strenuous exploratory expeditions, documentary rambles, and leisurely promenades has engaged Palestinians as both participants and spectators, as images of these ventures flood Facebook. Housewives, schoolteachers, and secretaries, retired people, students, and white-collar and blue-collar workers are the mainstay of these sightseeing forays – collective or solitary – into the countryside.

“Tuesday will be a full moon,” Al-Sheikh Khaled al-Dada from Al-Naqab told me. “We shall be trekking down Wadi al-Huwwar (five kilometers southeast of the Nabatean desert city Abdeh in Al-Naqab), where the yellow rocky terrain has a luminescent quality and the light will be spectacular.” He quickly cautioned, “But you cannot join us. The trek would be dangerous for you. The valley is strewn with pebbles and unstable stone.” To convince me of the hardship of the trek, he added, “We shall be clambering sharp cliffs.” He proceeded to show the danger involved, “The night involves ascending steep ravines, clambering over rocky terrain, scrabbling and crawling at times.”

My ethnological fieldwork and study of Palestinian cultural geography for my forthcoming book, “Land of Our Ancestors” (*Ard al-Ajdaad*), would not have been possible without Al-Sheikh Khaled’s intervention. He knows every mountain and every valley, every archaeological and historical landmark. Without his physical assistance my work would have remained purely academic. Travelling with him I was enabled to cross-reference my data and provide photographic empirical data of the various sites through Palestine as I proffered my historiographic interpretation from a Palestinian perspective. Apart from Al-Sheikh Khaled’s position as a lawyer in the Muslim Court in Bir al-Sabe’, he has enrolled in numerous classes in history and tourism. He is also an active member of various travel groups, including “Fursan al Sahel,” “Laffeh ala Bilady,” “Nadi al-Rahhalah,” “Watan waH,” and “Ruhhal al-Ard al-Mubarakeh,” which is his own group. These groups come

from various geographical zones. They organize expeditions, walks, and exploratory adventures throughout historical Palestine, from Al-Naqab in the South to the Golan up north. The members team up together, carpooling in four-wheel-drive vehicles, cars, or rented buses. Some of these trips are seasonal. Tours to visit water brooks and lakes in Al-Naqab are organized in winter. In the summer, hikes are organized in the Galilee and Golan in the north.

Al-Sheikh Khaled and his groups are compelled by the power and beauty of raw nature. Expeditions deemed too arduous or dangerous – hence those from which I am excluded – include driving and hiking to witness torrential waterfalls and roaring valleys in the Galilee, and trudging in the snow on the slopes of Mount Hermon. They are indefatigable, always on the move here, there, and everywhere, all the while sharing their adventures on social media.

Beautiful Palestine and almond blossoms.





Ancient olive trees.



The intensified interest in experiencing Palestine firsthand is a discrete political statement in which the tour organizers may be viewed as political leaders with a vision. The enthused guides, each with a unique perspective, impart the character of the tour with their personal umph. The individual charisma and knowledge of Hamza Aqrabawi, from Aqraba, southwest of Nablus, Sameer Murad from Dura and Raed Ishnewer from Dhahiriyya in Mount Hebron, and Al-Sheikh Khaled al-Dada from Al-Kuseifa in Al-Naqab draw a huge following.

Hamza Aqrabawi, a case in point, is a charmer. He is a storyteller and he beguiles his audience with well-woven narratives that recreate life the way it used to be in abandoned dilapidated sanctuaries, *maqamat*; he populates abandoned

dwelling caves and enriches the Palestinian landscape with a tapestry of anecdotes. Hamza entertains, educates, and brings the life of yore into the present. As we follow in his trail, we learn the tale behind the naming of the “cave of the seven sisters” in Dhul Nun (abandoned dwelling caves outside Aqraba). The stories of the place, the mythos of the land, have been gleaned from elders through ardent fieldwork in the villages. Hamza’s walks are interspersed with stories in relation to the proverbial Al-Khader, to the rites of spring, and here and there he provides traditional recipes, explaining how to prepare *mujaddara*, *khubizze*, or *maftul*. This charmer is the epitome of a tour organizer cum leader.

Similar guides are found throughout Palestine: Fadi Sanad in Artas, Nael

Iqtet in Rabud, and the energetic scenic tours of the group “Landmark and Places” with the charismatic Mohammad Khalil Ibrahim who leads his romantic followers through lyrical vistas and landscapes of Palestine, even procuring permits for West Bankers to join his scenic excursions. Basem Musa’s blog *Nature Speaks* is full of birds, gazelles, and nature and has a great number of followers. The list is endless. Iyad Jaber Abu Ahmad, Sliman Bwirat, and Lutfi Salameh are equally active in promoting Palestinian beauty and love for the land of our ancestors.

Samir Al-Zeer from Dura, a close friend, is a veteran tour organizer. He started the hiking group “Children of Canaan” over ten years ago in his effort to preserve and highlight Palestinian patrimony. Though too late to preserve the destroyed old city of Dura, once a veritable museum, in his capacity as an adviser to the municipality of Dura he has been able to preserve major sites. His cultural/historical cum archaeological hikes are wide-ranging and cover most of the West Bank from Al-Dhahiriyya in the south to Faqu’ah in Marj Ibn Amer, known in classical literature as Via Maris.

Selfies abound amidst lush green valleys, roaring waterfalls, and running streams in the Galilee and Golan as remarkable individuals share their delight in nature. Outstanding in the beautiful photography of nature stands Imad Tartour and his friend Yousef Sharar. Always featuring Imad’s young son, they share their videos of swimming in mountain ponds, wading in streams, climbing

The discourse with the land of our ancestors highlights the cultural, ecological, and historical affective relationship between the Palestinians and the land. A renewed love affair with the homeland and the joy of rediscovery of the intrinsic bond between identity and land finds its expression all over social media.



mountain peaks. Imad delights us with photos of snowy landscapes as well as fresh summer water springs. His post titled, “Irthina wa Turathna” beguiles us with the spectacular waterfalls, ponds, and natural water reservoirs that reveal an extremely beautiful Palestine. Abdallah Ahmad, from the ethnically cleansed town of Dawayma, where a massive genocide took place in 1948, specializes in depicting ethnically cleansed villages in his blog, “Ethnically Cleansed Villages, Mosques, Cemeteries, and Water Springs” *قرى مساجد مقابر اودية وعيون ماء مهجر*. His live videos in his solitary explorations provide the details that entice many others to



Picturesque olive trees and the forsaken maqam Dhul Nun in Aqraba.

follow in his trail photographing, with selfies, the ruined mosques, the piles of stones of the leveled and pillaged villages and cemeteries.

“Dr. Ali, this is what you are looking for.” The young man in his twenties pointed to the engraved decoration on the lintel of an abandoned home. A group of local young men surrounded me as I unexpectedly dropped by the remote Burj Village to cross-examine my references and take pictures for my forthcoming book on our Palestinian patrimony. “We know your work from Facebook,” he said. “You isolate the details and classify them and we have learned to identify these details in our village.”

Social media has played a major role in promoting the rising consciousness of Palestine as the most beautiful country and in the appropriation of Palestinian natural and cultural heritage in numerous postings, each with its own topics. The range includes fauna and flora specialists, historians, archaeologists, ethnographers, and lyrical romanticists who photograph the beautiful diversity of Palestinian



Hamza Aqrabawi beguiles his followers with his anecdotes reconstructing Palestinian social, religious, and culinary heritage.

geography. Each presents a different angle. We learn about Palestinian ecological diversity and history. On Facebook we follow Fr. Raed Abusahlia, a Catholic priest, as he travels throughout Palestine photographing and archiving ancient olive trees. From Jenin, Dr. Walid Basha delights us with his photos of butterflies, local and migratory birds in the swamps and marshes of Marj Ibn Amer and Marj Sanour. Mousa Saba from Deir Ballout documents the fauna and flora of the Saffit District with special focus on his town and its famous winter lake that draws droves of ornithophiles to the region.

The discourse with Palestinian cultural geography and patrimony has created a way of life that traverses the political-geographic

frontiers and in this respect has fulfilled de facto the dream of the return. Twenty years ago, Elena, my wife, and I were saddened to be the only Arabs in the historical and natural sites. With joy we now see Palestinians everywhere.

“These groups in their range of activities and the terrain they cover,” commented Samir Huleleh, “have been able to dissolve the boundaries between the areas administered by the Palestinian Authority and the rest of Palestine.” He further added, “The groups are composed mostly of youths, many of whom have no university affiliation. They are mostly ordinary people who venture into the Palestinian countryside without academic pretensions.” Monica Awad, in a separate interview, noted, “They are infused with great longing and passion. It is a love story in the making.”

“In the process they came to recognize the beauty and diversity of the Palestinian landscape... In their postings they reveal the ecological diversity between the Mediterranean and the Jordan Rift, between the mountains in the north and the desert,” Samir pointed out. “Along their trails they pass by and photograph Roman water conduits, ruined Byzantine churches, remains of Mamluk and Ottoman edifices... all attesting to our deep roots in the land.”

Reconnecting with our cultural and ecological heritage as evinced by the plethora of tours deployed may be viewed as a collective nationalist discourse in which the leader is no longer a politician with set political rhetoric but rather a tour organizer, a patriot who does not necessarily need to be an expert or a specialist but one familiar with the local geography of his/her homeland.

The group leader escorts the group along scenic routes, rough terrains, and towering cliffs and helps the followers, post factum, to appropriate their heritage. The group is led on an exciting adventure that immerses the members in a physical existentialist relationship with the homeland. In this sense, the country hike assumes a nationalist dimension without political sloganeering.

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