# 15 Envisioning a tourism of peace in the Gaza Strip

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## Introduction

The idea that tourism can contribute to peace and positive futures is increasingly gaining currency in the global community (Moufakkir and Kelly 2010). This chapter reports on an initiative which demonstrates the potentials and limitations of such assertions in places of 'hot conflict' such as Palestine. In previous work, the authors were instrumental in setting up a peace incubator through a virtual classroom by linking students from Gaza with students from the United States (see McIntosh and Alfaleet 2014). As a result of these efforts, in 2014 students of Gaza University developed a profound vision for the Gaza Strip in 2050 that identified tourism as the key to a renewed and thriving economy. They envisioned a future distinguished by peace and prosperity. All the problems that currently beset the region were seen as now addressed in 2050 to the satisfaction of the various parties. Additionally, a virtual museum developed by the students in a joint project of Indiana University's Indianapolis campus (IUPUI) and Gaza University, identified 252 sites of touristic potential. These, sites together with the promise of the re-opening of the overland pilgrimage route from Gaza City to Jerusalem (Al Quds) would be center stage in attracting international tourists. Through a process of back casting, the various steps in achieving the vision were under deep consideration by students when the Israel launched its attack 'Operation Protective Edge' on 7 July, 2014, which soon led to widespread loss of Palestinian lives and the destruction of much of the urban landscape of the major cities of Gaza, including a number of the historic and cultural sites just identified as potential tourism assets by the students. The full consequences of this most devastating war is still to be realized but as the authors describe in this chapter, the dream of making Gaza the jewel of the Mediterranean lives on in the minds of those who participated in the visioning exercise.

## Envisioning a peaceful and prosperous Gaza

In 2011, leaders of the private and independent Gaza University (formerly the Gaza Women's College) sought to provide opportunities for western style training for their students through a collaboration with US academic institutions. As the

Director of International Partnerships at Indiana University's Indianapolis campus (IUPUI), co-author Ian McIntosh was able to marshal considerable interest in building connections across what was understood to be a profound divide. An introductory internet-based class utilizing Skype in 2012 was taught by McIntosh in cooperation with his counterpart and co-author, Jamil Alfaleet of Gaza University. This initial offering attracted 16 US and 16 Palestinian students, all working together on finding novel solutions to issues of common concern in Palestine and Israel, including borders, refugees, settlements and Jerusalem. While there was considerable discussion with Gaza faculty on the desirability of direct participation by Israeli representatives, the timing was considered inappropriate for the emphasis was to be on local capacity building rather than negotiation (see McIntosh and Alfaleet 2014).

By 2013, over 170 students were enrolled in what was now a Gaza-focused experimental Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) with many faculty sharing their expertise and experiences in peace-building. The Gaza virtual classroom welcomed interested individuals from over 20 countries, including Turkey, Russia, Kenya and Uruguay, who wanted to work hand in hand with Gaza youth on the class topic of identifying a vision of peace and prosperity for 2050, and also the steps for its realization. The prized vision adopted by the class, described in detail later, centered on tourism as the primary driver of development and peace in the region.[1]

The technique of visioning utilized in the Gaza University classes of McIntosh and Alfaleet is best described as both an art and a science: Artistic because adherents compose vivid pictures of an ideal that appeals to all the senses; and scientific because adherents anchor their utopian images so firmly in their minds that when presented with options, only those leading towards the imagined goal will seem viable (Boulding 1990; Kwartler and Longo 2008).

In the visioning exercises from 2012 to 2014, McIntosh and Alfaleet encouraged the students to imagine a Gaza Strip that was both peaceful and prosperous – the jewel of the Mediterranean. The students gathered together the most inspiring array of pictures and words describing what Gaza would look like in 2050. There were dazzling images of vibrant seaports and airports, of bustling high-tech and high-rise shopping and residential facilities, and sports centers, modern and efficient transportation networks, elaborate green spaces and water parks, and most importantly, beautiful, empowered, confident people living a dream life.

A political scientist and head of international programs at Gaza University, Alfaleet described this virtual project of picturing a nonviolent and affluent Gaza Strip as the most popular elective on their campus in 2013. The classroom visioning process was entirely transparent. Lectures were delivered live by McIntosh and colleagues in Indiana and Australia through Skype, then recorded, reviewed by both Alfaleet and the students, and then discussed live and online using a novel new course networking technology developed by engineers at IUPUI called 'the CN', an acronym for course networking. All lectures and reading materials, including the associated online discussion was, and remains, freely available on the web (see www.thecn.com/mooc101).

The target date of 2050 was chosen for the resolution of all issues that divide Israelis and Palestinians because by that time the students would be community leaders and helping to mold the development of their homeland in line with the specifics of their vision. To emphasize this point, in the live sessions McIntosh and Alfaleet would talk of the present only in the past tense. In a very short time period, the students were beginning to feel confident that the power to realize their dream was in their own hands. By making the vision of the future come alive in the students' minds, the teachers temporarily lifted the burden of daily life from their shoulders and provided a safe space for them to think creatively. In 2050, the torment and strife of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, the Gaza blockade, unemployment and poverty, the sewage and water crisis, the 'imprisonment' and other suffering, would all be a distant memory.

## Tourism for Gaza

McIntosh and Alfaleet had investigated with students the various industries that could sustain this wonderful vision, like fishing, strawberry and citrus production, and fresh flower exports. Experts were invited into the virtual classroom to discuss the preconditions for success. It was tourism, however, that attracted the most discussion, and the Spring 2014 semester was dedicated to this topic.

The tourism industry was understood to have the greatest potential for sustainable development outcomes in Gaza. Political and religious interests in the Holy Land have resulted in the greatest density of archaeological sites almost anywhere in the world. While acknowledging that Biblical archaeology was as fraught as the contemporary politics of the region, the question asked of students was how this great archaeological resource would be utilized for the long-term benefit of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (see Haessly 2010; Higgins-Desbiolles 2008; Pollock and Bernbeck 2005).

Over the course of several months, more than 250 sites of archaeological and touristic merit in the Gaza Strip were identified by Gaza University students, including old churches, mosques, bazaars and the ruins of caravanserai from the old overland Silk Route. For example, one long forgotten site buried in the southern deserts of the Gaza Strip at Deir al Balah was associated with Cleopatra's Egypt. During the reign of Ramesses 2, this was the furthest east of Egypt's garrisoned fortresses. Cypriot, Mycenaean and Minoan artefacts found here speak to Deir al Balah's cosmopolitan past. Many of these precious artefacts, including unique decorated Egyptian coffins, have been looted or removed to art museums in Israel and elsewhere, including by the late Israeli general and amateur archaeologist Moshe Dayan. In the vision of 2050, however, these artefacts had been returned to Gaza's newly constructed museums. Another important site, in northern Gaza, is linked to a bloody siege by Alexander the Great in 332 in which all males were killed and all women and children sold into slavery. This site, known as Anthedon, is one of the oldest Mediterranean ports, but is unfortunately now the scene of a Hamas military training ground. The site has been witness to many Israeli bombings and efforts by local historians and students to have the site

protected and the training ground relocated have been ignored. Engagement with such sites reminded the students of the rich history of Gaza and built enthusiasm for the potential for them to serve as vital tourism assets in 2050.

With tourism envisioned as the backbone of the future Palestinian economy, students explored the many dimensions of this industry. They understood that a record number of tourists were now traveling the globe on tour packages, cruises, adventure experiences, and independent itineraries. They acknowledged that all of the visitors and their associated activities generated change in local communities and that these had social, economic and environmental impacts, some of which were positive, some negative, and many unforeseeable. But it was tourism's contribution to community development and poverty reduction, and its ability to spark other economic activities such as agriculture, transportation and handicraft production that inspired the students. As a labor intensive industry which offers low entry barriers for small and medium enterprise, tourism will undoubtedly create opportunities for the vast and growing numbers of unemployed in Gaza (see World Bank 2014).

As the students reviewed Gaza's 250 identified touristic sites, many appreciating their significance for the first time, they experienced a deep sense of pride in the local culture and in the natural environment. They were learning not just about the past, and the past in the present, but also the past's potential as a resource driving a cherished vision of the future.

The subject of pilgrimage was prioritized in the virtual classroom. According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) world tourism barometer, religious tourism is among the fastest growing sectors of the global tourism industry (UNWTO 2014), with many hundreds of millions of people undertaking pilgrimages to the major sites in Mecca, Rome, in northern Spain, Shikoku in Japan, and throughout India and Ireland. Pilgrimage (and sacred tourism) was viewed by students as a particularly strong potential driver of economic growth in the Gaza of the future. Jerusalem, or Al-Quds as it is known in Arabic, is the third of Islam's holy sites after Mecca and Medina, and should attract over three million Muslim pilgrims annually. In historic times, the port of Gaza was where many pilgrims would begin their short journey to Haram al Sharif and the Dome of the Rock. It is from this site that the Prophet Mohammed, on his night journey from Mecca, had ascended to heaven bringing back with him vital new religious practices, such as praying five times a day – the second most important of Islam's Five Pillars.

There were two major assignments for students in the virtual tourism class of 2014. Through a SWOT analysis the students were to explore the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the future tourism industry. With the vision fulfilled in 2050, students were asked: If three million tourists or pilgrims were to pass through the Gaza Strip and on to Haram Al-Sharif, how would the people of Gaza feed them? Where would they be housed? What forms of entertainment would be available to them, like museums, parks, and cultural activities? A plan of action was to emerge through a process of 'back casting', where each step forward was to be brainstormed, and mapped.

The question of healing the people, both individually and collectively, was understood to be a necessary precondition for realizing this vision. With this in mind, McIntosh and Alfaleet (2014) engaged social workers from IUPUI with strengths in this area of social practice in the virtual classroom. Through singing, sharing, and listening, these educators fostered a real bond between and with the students. From our understanding, healing after generations of suffering and oppression can be defined as having hope in the future. Building both trust and the capacity to do the work of peace was therefore deemed just as important as identifying the specific educational needs of the population (e.g. training historians, archaeologists and hotel managers) and all those who will be fully engaged in the Gaza tourism industry of tomorrow.

## Gaza virtual museum

The second assignment for students was to undertake a survey of a major archaeological or historical treasure from the Gaza Strip and then imagine, in a best case scenario, how it would be featured in the ideal vision for Gaza's future. Some students visited old churches and mosques and documented the history and significance of these assets. They were asked to consider how Gazan authorities could best promote such unique examples of Palestinian culture, religion and history. Others visited antique shops to discuss the range of antiquities housed there and try to ascertain their provenance. Additionally the students undertook meetings with government agencies with oversight of tourism, antiquities, and related industries.

In each case, the goal was to have the work of each student or student group uploaded to a virtual museum of the Gaza Strip; a site that was totally constructed by them. This was understood by all to be a prelude to the sort of museum and tourist facility that would become a reality in the Gaza of the future. The virtual museum would be accessible to anyone in the world and it could therefore serve as a marketing tool to attract tourists traveling to the Holy Land to ensure they visited Gaza to not miss such hidden treasures.

The Gaza Virtual Museum would include video footage of student interviews, visits to archaeological sites, analyses of famous artefacts, and so on. The discovery in 2013 of a statue of Apollo that was dredged up by a fisherman from the Mediterranean Sea provided an important case study for the virtual class. McIntosh and Alfaleet, for example, solicited expert advice from expert archaeologists on the sculpture for sharing with the students as they prepared their virtual museum submissions.

An abbreviated entry on Apollo in the Gaza Virtual Museum, for example, would include the following details:

Description: Apollo bronze statue. Age – 2100 years. 450kg weight, 1.75m tall.

Estimated Value: $340US million

Circumstances of Find: Fisherman Jawdat Abu Ghurab found the bronze sculpture 100m offshore at Deir al Balah half buried in the sand in 4m of water. He cut off one finger and took it to the market to see if the metal was gold. There was also an attempt to sell the statue on EBay before it was confiscated by Hamas. The current whereabouts of the sculpture is unknown. Institutions in both France and Switzerland offered to lease and restore the sculpture, given that there are no appropriate museum facilities in Gaza, and especially because there are religious and customary restrictions on the public revelation of the naked male body.

Significance: Rather than a 'true' Apollo (i.e. a divine statue), the Gaza bronze was probably an archaistic figure that served as a 'servant-statue' holding a candelabra or tray and which adorned the houses of rich Hellenized people in the Late Hellenistic/Early Imperial period.

Required Care: A bronze just out of the sea is in danger of 'bronze disease'.

Contact: Gaza Ministry of Tourism

Students were assigned a number of readings, particularly about the work of the non-governmental organization RIWAQ in the West Bank which is dedicated to urban renewal through the preservation of historical treasures (see Riwaq n.d.). The 'archaeology and peace' movement in the Middle East was also examined in detail (see Pollock and Bernbeck 2005). These resources developed the students' appreciation of the ways that a sites' antiquities can enhance community identity and serve as assets for not only tourism but also for global appreciation in the world community.

Museum Studies was a strong focus in the discussion and, in particular, the global Museums of Conscience Movement, part of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (see International Coalition of Sites of Conscience n.d.). These 'peace museums' are often the centerpiece of tourism activities in former conflict zones. The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa, or the District 6 Museum in Cape Town, are examples of what one might term activist museums, for they deal with the legacy of injustice and are designed to bring about social transformation. During one class, students were asked to post images of peace monuments online, especially those which are major tourist draw cards. The New York sculpture 'Non-Violence' (also known as 'The Knotted Gun'), which stands outside the United Nations headquarters, was a class favorite. This pro-peace sculpture by Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd depicts a 45-caliber revolver with its barrel knotted into a bullet-blocking twist; a powerful commentary of the desire to end gun-related violence. It has become an essential photo-op for UN visitors.

The students were asked to make an inventory of Gaza sculptures and to imagine what sorts of similar monuments might attract tourists to the Gaza Strip. It is important to note that there is a minimum of statuary in Gaza, given the restrictions imposed by Islam on the representation of the human body. Even the famed Palestinian freedom fighter, Yasser Arafat, is not honored in this manner,

despite considerable public pressure to do so. For those budding artists and architects in the class, what the public spaces of Gaza would look like in 2050 was a topic of great interest.

The stage was therefore set for the next stage in the development of the Gaza Virtual Museum with more interviews in the pipeline, and more discoveries of Gaza's rich historical legacy, but then all was to come crashing down in mid-2014 with the Gaza War (Operation Protective Edge). This was the third such war since 'Operation Cast Lead' of 2008 and 'Operation Pillar of Defense' in 2012.

## Operation Protective Edge

With control of the Gaza Strip being handed over to the Palestinian Authority in June 2014, and a reconciliation underway between Hamas and Fatah, it seemed that change was at hand. Alfaleet was given the task of helping to lead a social reconciliation committee in Gaza to provide reparations to the families who had lost children in the Hamas-Fatah conflict of 2006. The Palestinian Authority acknowledged Israel's right to exist and renounced violence. While some of the Gaza students had their doubts about the long term viability of the new route to peace, many felt confident that their life-affirming vision was indeed achievable. With this vital first step, it was no longer just a pipe dream. The students had looked deeply into the future and liked what they saw.

The ensuing months, however, were witness to the most appalling destruction and massacre. Of the three wars that Israel had launched against Gaza since 2008, the war of 2014 known by Israelis as 'Operation Protective Edge' was the worst. Over 51 days, more than 2000 Palestinians were killed, and hundreds of thousands were displaced when their homes were destroyed. Industry was targeted, as were schools, power plants, hospitals, media outlets and shopping malls – the entire infrastructure of life in the Gaza Strip.

During the war, Alfaleet, speaking with the aid of his car battery to power Skype calls, spelled out for McIntosh in the USA just how much the vision of the people of Gaza had been perverted by the unceasing and merciless attacks by Israeli soldiers. Usually the most optimistic of people, Alfaleet was now questioning whether Gaza even had a future. The cherished vision of utopia had been forcibly displaced with a new reality of dystopia where there was no longer day or night – all was blurred. Light had been replaced by darkness, and generations of hatred launched. In one telling moment, Alfaleet told McIntosh that he could write a doctorate in psychology on all that he had learned about human nature in his interactions with people who had witnessed atrocities, lost family members, or who were now without hope and little more than the 'walking dead'. Everyone was pulling together though, Alfaleet said. All were in need of counselling but survival was the top priority.

Alfaleet's house was bombed twice and he could not see any reason why he and his family should be singled out in the supposedly 'pin-point missile attacks' on militants. It was illustrative of the use of collective punishment of the entire population of Gaza as Israeli strategy.

During the Skype calls, Alfaleet would ask McIntosh in an excited tone if I could hear the F16s screaming overhead, and the bombs exploding. 'Yes', McIntosh would reply, wondering if Alfaleet would survive that night or even that very moment. With each blast McIntosh could hear the shrieks of the women, for some of the bombs were landing quite close to the school in which Alfaleet and his family had taken refuge (Many people had been corralled there by 'stink bombs' and now there was nowhere else to turn). McIntosh could also hear Alfaleet's eight year old son laughing manically. Apparently he would dance with each explosion and, when a rocket was shot from Gaza towards Israel, he would farewell it on its journey. This was a coping mechanism; a way of dealing with the extreme emotional distress.

While visiting a partially destroyed church shelter where hundreds of displaced people were huddled, including in the toilets, Alfaleet witnessed a scene that he described as 'hell'. A man in total despair was crying out repeatedly 'the dead are the lucky ones'. New mothers with little to sustain their babies pleaded with Alfaleet for help, thinking that he might be a UN aid worker because he was sharing fresh water from his now destroyed farm. Children, some as young as five or six year, were running wild and chanting how they would destroy Israel when they were grown. In this environment, McIntosh and Alfaleet both watched on the Internet as their students in Gaza were transformed from being open and willing to embrace a new formula for peace in the Middle East to being filled with fear and hostility. 'May Allah destroy Israel', some wrote on their Facebook pages.

In one Skype call, McIntosh inquired about the possibility of mass death from disease as a result of so many people living in overcrowded circumstances, and how there was a need for the construction of basic sanitary facilities. Alfaleet laughed and said that no one was talking in such a fashion. Such facilities were a luxury that no one could afford. 'The people need food, water and shelter', he said. 'They need peace. They need their dignity'.

A United Nations report had already declared, prior to the war, that Gaza would be unlivable by 2020 due to problems of pollution, sewage, unsafe drinking water, and other critical shortages (United Nations Country Team in the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2012). This timeframe has surely been brought forward as a result of this latest conflict. Walking around the ruins of once prosperous neighborhoods and bustling industrial zones, Alfaleet described to McIntosh a scene that was worse than what he had witnessed in Turkey following the massive earthquake of 1999. In some parts of Gaza, like Shejaia, you cannot even see where the roads and buildings used to be. 'Nothing shocks us anymore', Alfaleet said. 'We are beyond that. The resolve of the Palestinian people to live a dignified life free from this tyranny has increased one million fold. The infrastructure of life may be gone but not the will of the people for justice and their basic human rights'.

When McIntosh and Alfaleet connected via the Internet, Alfaleet would provide McIntosh with the highlights of the previous 24 hours and the latter would compose Facebook posts – updates for colleagues around the world – on the unfolding situation. Some of these posts described the humanitarian crisis, a new

'Al-Nakbah', and how more bombs had been thrown at Gaza than on Hiroshima in 1945. Some posts described tragic circumstances, for example when a four day old baby was accidentally left behind by parents who had panicked when they received the one minute warning by Israelis to vacate their home prior to it being bombed. Some posts praised Palestinian unity and resilience. Church officials who opened their doors to Muslims seeking refuge, and who were engaged in a 'solidarity' Ramadan, rated special mention. Finally, there was speculation about how only the opening of the borders, both land and sea, could offer hope of a better economy and way of life for all.

When the ceasefire was announced in late August 2014, celebrations rang out all through the Gaza Strip. Victory! But it was more a celebration that the people had survived and that Israel had been forced to the negotiating table. 'Israel's security cannot be secured by force', Alfaleet said. 'If we cannot solve this crisis through negotiations then we are all going to hell. The men of Gaza would rather die an honorable death in fighting the enemy than by the slow choking death of this current endless siege'. But Alfaleet was also pessimistic about the Egypt-brokered peace talks. In his calculation, there had been over 100,000 hours of negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians since the Oslo Accords of 1993. 'All for nothing', he said. He was tired of words.

In trying to rally his spirits, McIntosh told him about the major street demonstrations in support of Gaza in multiple settings around the world. He was heartened by this but he despaired that such gestures could not put a single meal on the table of those who were starving. McIntosh disagreed, and said that the two of them should write an article about the visioning project and try and sway public opinion especially in the USA, the source of the very missiles that were raining down upon his head. 'It will be just words', he said.

In the midst of the crisis, McIntosh had read a news report of a visioning circle held in Israel involving both Jews and Palestinians. Under the banner 'We refuse to be enemies', the visionaries sent a strong message of hope in a future where people were united in a common dream of peace and prosperity (Devaney 2014). Such a sentiment was an essential stepping stone in achieving the vision of Gaza for 2050. McIntosh shared the article with his colleague and Alfaleet identified with the spirit of this message and agreed about the necessity of holding firm to the dream, but the situation was grim. Of the 252 student-identified Gaza tourist sites, for example, it is not known how many of them still exist. Gaza University itself survived the onslaught, but sustained extensive damage. The historic center of old Gaza which was filled with narrow alleys and markets was totally destroyed. Places of worship and historic significance have been lost forever.

Acknowledging that hope was the antidote to trauma, Alfaleet agreed with McIntosh that the world should know more about the dreams and utopian vision of Gaza youth. Even amidst the devastation, the beautiful image of Gaza as a bustling seaport, one of the major trading posts of the Mediterranean, filled with pilgrims and tourists, does not vanish so easily.

# Conclusion

The technique of visioning utilized by McIntosh and Alfaleet with their students at Gaza University is employed with a growing frequency as a tool in urban and social planning worldwide. It is a vital approach to assist people in feeling empowered to create the futures they desire. For this work in Gaza students were asked: who did they want to be as a people in 2050, where did they want to be as a state, and how was this to be achieved? Ideally such deliberations are conducted in public with all parties to a conflict present, including interested outsiders. This was the policy that McIntosh and Alfaleet brought to the class when they welcomed participants from many countries. The idea is that when plans for the future become widely known a door is opened for sympathetic outsiders to become active partners in making the vision a reality and for others who may have been unsympathetic, to be less likely to undermine those plans. Gaza students determined that tourism, above all other industries, had the potential to deliver significant and sustainable outcomes of a positive sort for the people of the Gaza Strip by 2050. In the vision of peace and prosperity that they developed, Gaza is a dazzling place, its seaport and airport among the busiest in the Mediterranean. The critical water shortages of the present were a thing of the past and the crippling unemployment problems had been resolved. The 51 day Israeli war on Gaza in 2014 was a devastating setback for the journey to peace and prosperity, but after emerging from the trauma and depression the struggle must continue. By holding firm to the vision they created, both the theory and the practice, the art and the science of envisioning a peaceful and prosperous Gaza through tourism, the students cannot be deterred from the hope they themselves created and will surely achieve their dream.

# Note

1   See Ward (2013) for a report by Gaza University student Mohammed H. Al-Aila.

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