

Impact of Political Factor on the Tourism Development in Palestine: Case Study of Sabastiya Village

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Abstract Tourism is vulnerable to exogenous factors; these factors can disrupt the tourism industry, lead to the decline in tourists, and influence their choice of destination. This study explores tourism in Palestine in general, with a focus on Sabastiya Village. This study aims to describe the factors influencing the tourism development in Sabastiya Village. We used two methods to achieve our research objective. We interviewed tourism policy makers in the area and utilized Geographic Information System (GIS) system that showed the geopolitical situation of the study area. Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory is the major factor that negatively influences the Palestinian tourism sector in terms of the controlled Area C. Based on the findings; this research suggests two solutions that may overcome the challenges facing Sabastiya Village. First, the Palestinian government should increase their attention to this area at all levels. Second, the local community and other local institutions at Sabastiya Village should be aware of the means to protect their archeological and cultural heritage sites. As revealed to tourism sector in Sabastiya village that without an end of the occupation it will be very hard to grow and develop tourism industry in the area of study.

Keywords Palestine, Sabastiya, Tourism development, Conflict, Challenges

1. Introduction

Tourism industry plays an important role in many developing countries. The survival or growth of the economy in numerous countries depends on this tourism industry [1, 2]. Issa and Altinay [3] noted that tourism had become a significant social and economic phenomenon and the industry grew substantially in the previous century. Tourism brings economy to a destination and advantages to tourists.

Tourism industry is important to the GDP of a country; this industry creates economic development, savings, investment, jobs, and foreign exchange earnings as well as alleviates problems regarding balance of costs [4]. The problem is tourism is sensitive to political unrest, which can create a substantial effect on the industry [5, 6]. Goeldner and Ritchie [7] discussed the elements of political instability, such as wars, conflicts, crisis, and terrorism. Several previous studies examined and illustrated the effect of crisis, either human or natural disaster, on the tourism industry.

Palestinian tourism sector has been characterized with an increasingly important profile because of its economic and religious significance and considerable role in Israeli-Palestinian relations; it represents Palestinian

statehood and identity and wide Middle Eastern politics [8].

The Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR) [9] reported that the Palestinian economy lost nearly 20 billion USD from 2000 to 2004 because of Israeli incursion and closure policies. The loss of the Palestinian tourism sector estimated by PECDAR reached 1785 million USD.

1.1. Palestine and Tourism

Palestine is located in the heart of Middle East and lies southwest of Asia and east of the Mediterranean basin. It is situated at the crossroads among three continents, that is, Europe, Africa, and Asia [10, 11]. Palestine recently became an autonomous state [12]. The historical Palestine is almost 26,000 km², and approximately 78% of the Palestinian territories are occupied and controlled by Israeli after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The remaining 22% of the Palestinian territories include the West Bank at the west of Jordan River, which covers 5820 km², and an area of the Gaza Strip that is approximately 365 km² [13]. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) controls the part of West Bank and Gaza Strip, which is called the Palestinian territories, since the beginning of the peace process of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and ending of the first Palestinian uprising in 1994 [10].

Since the Taba Accord in September 1995, the PNA launched the takeover of parts of the Palestinian territories (West Bank and Gaza Strip), leading to the increased tourism

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investment and growth of the tourism industry in Palestinian areas, such as Jericho, Gaza, Bethlehem, and Ramallah [14]. Consequently, the Ministry Of Tourism And Antiquities started to restructure the tourism industry in Palestinian areas and attempted to boost the industry by rehabilitating tourism products [10, 15]. At the end of September 2000, the peace process between the PNA and Israel failed, and the Palestinian tourism industry stopped because of the Palestinian–Israeli crisis, which also affected tourism in Jordan [16]. Cakmak and Isaac [17] uncovered posts of travelers regarding their experience in an ongoing conflict area. They revealed that aside from the primary attributes, destination-specific attributes should be clustered and interpreted to understand visitors' image of a conflict area [17]. For example, the segregation wall was mentioned in all visitors' posts, and the accessibility to the city was perceived very difficult and restricted. Nevertheless, the same wall was also regarded as one of the main attractions in Bethlehem by visitors next to the Nativity Church.

International Alert (Case study of Palestine and Israel) [14] explained that the improvement of tourism in Palestinian territories during the peace between PNA and Israel in 2000 is evident in the number of visitors to the Palestinian territories (1.055 million); 330,000 guests stayed overnight and occupied 980,000 bed nights. During that time, the number of tour guides increased from 18 to 223. Accommodations expanded from 54 hotels with 2464 rooms to 91 hotels with 4275 rooms.

According to the press release of Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) [18] on the survey of hotel activities in the West Bank during 2015, approximately half a million guests spent 1.4 million nights, and 484,394 guests stayed in West Bank hotels; 30% were from European Union countries, 11% were Palestinian, and 9% were from the United States and Canada. The number of hotel guests was 21% lower than that in the previous year. During 2015, the number of guest nights in the West Bank hotels reached 1,420,264, of which 34% were from European Union countries, 12% were Palestinians, and 10% were from the United States and Canada. A total of 112 West Bank hotels responded to the survey at the end of 2015. They had an average of 6,791 rooms and 15,059 beds. These figures were distributed by region as follows: North of West Bank, 19 hotels comprising 377 rooms with 1073 beds; Middle of West Bank, 35 hotels comprising 1527 rooms with 3255 beds; Jerusalem, 21 hotels comprising 1471 rooms with 3244 beds; South of West Bank, 37 hotels comprising 3415 rooms with 7487 beds.

The President of the PCBS mentioned in the executive summary of hotel activities in Palestinian territories that they experienced difficulties in conducting field surveys at the border points because of Israeli control. Despite the Israeli closure and siege on the Palestinian territories, this survey provides alternative data on visitors who stay in hotels as well as key indicators of activities around the hotel and of guests in Palestinian hotels.

1.2. Factors Influencing Tourism Sector

Several researchers have discussed the factors influencing the tourism sector, including tourist destination, tourism industry, infrastructure, and numbers of tourists or tourist flow. Cost factors affect outbound tourism. Inflation, exchange rates, and price hike affect the numbers of package tours to destinations. Although numerous factors influence tourism, this research focuses on political instability as a considerable challenge for tourism. Many researchers have examined the influence of political unrest on the tourism sector. For example, the war in Iraq provided an impression that tourism sector would slightly decline in a country occupied by foreign armies and under a denominational revolution [19]; therefore, war is considered the main obstacle the tourism industry. Brown [20] cited that political risk events affect the pricing and timing of tourism creation and diminish the motivation to invest and save in tourism. Issa and Altinay [3] mentioned that Hall and O'Sullivan (1996, p. 106) defined political instability as *"A situation in which conditions and mechanisms of governance and rule are challenged, as to their political legitimacy by elements operating from outside of the normal operations of the political system."*

Several researchers have discussed the obstacles to tourism in Palestine and the importance of borders in contemporary geopolitics [17, 21-23]. By contrast, a few scholars have focused on Sabastiya Village. For example, Sizer [24] indicated that the control of pilgrimage by tour operators and group leaders in the occupied territories is limited because of the policies of the Israeli government and their ownership. If any Palestinian coach drivers or guides and agents intend to resist Israeli policies, then they will be exposed to threats on their future profitability, livelihood, and licensing. Sizer [24] provided an example in his study and discussed how the Israeli authorities claim that any incident that occurred in Israel is caused by Palestinians; the Israeli embassy in London advice international tourists that travel to the Palestinian territories are very firmly controlled and that the Palestinian soldiers hinder tourists from entering. Israeli soldiers were also assassinated by political activists in Gaza.

Palestinian Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Al-Bandak in 2005 attended the conference of "A Strategic Tourism Industry Response to International Terrorism" in Pattaya, Thailand; in this event, he revealed that the private and public sectors were facing many monetary difficulties and the travel and tourism industries were in a slump because of a decline in income and revenue. The minister stated that the official channels among ministries of Palestine and Israel were blocked such that the promotion of tourism suffers; promotion of the land declined as the peace and trust between Palestine and Israel weakened. Numerous investments in Palestinian tourism collapsed because of the tragedy. The downfall of the official channels among the ministries of tourism of Palestine and Israel and the Second Intifada started against the Israeli occupation in 2000 drove

both ministers of tourism to sign a statement of commitment in November 2004 to promote tourism in the area. In 2005, representatives of Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and Israel met to initiate a joint collaboration aimed to increase the flow of foreign tourists. Despite this agreement, Israelis continued with actions of conflict and violence, which did not end until the Palestinian society was demolished along with their land, in addition to building the Apartheid Wall on Palestinian land, Israeli measures against Palestinian inhabitants through assassinations, closure, and seizure of the land [25].

PECDAR [9] noted that the numbers of Israeli military checkpoints in the West Bank is more than 157. These checkpoints and other measures decrease the movement of Palestinians; these checkpoints are also imposed on tourists and pilgrims visiting Palestinian territories. Another obstacle is the division of Palestine into three areas: Area A, where the PNA effectively exercises control, Area B, where authority is shared between Israel and the PNA, and Area C, where Israel maintains full control [26].

1.3. Sabastiya as Case Study

Sabastiya, located 10 km northwest of Nablus, is a small Palestinian town renowned for being surrounded with a fertile valley, where figs, olives, almonds, grapes, and other fruits and vegetables are grown. The present-day village is located right next to impressive archaeological remains (VisitPalestine.ps). The population is slightly over 3,000, and all people live under the weight of military occupation [27]. Given its long history, Sabastiya boasts a number of important archaeological monuments (Figure 1). Currently, people can see the ruins of ancient Sabastiya on a hill overlooking the present village and feel the power of six successive cultures dating 10,000 years back: Canaanite, Israelite, Hellenistic, Herodian, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman. According to religious tradition, the head of John the Baptist was found in Sabastiya [28]. Once a popular tourist attraction, the area is being economically strangled as travel becomes increasingly difficult. Several of its land has been stolen by the neighboring illegal Israeli settlement of Shaveh Shomron [27].

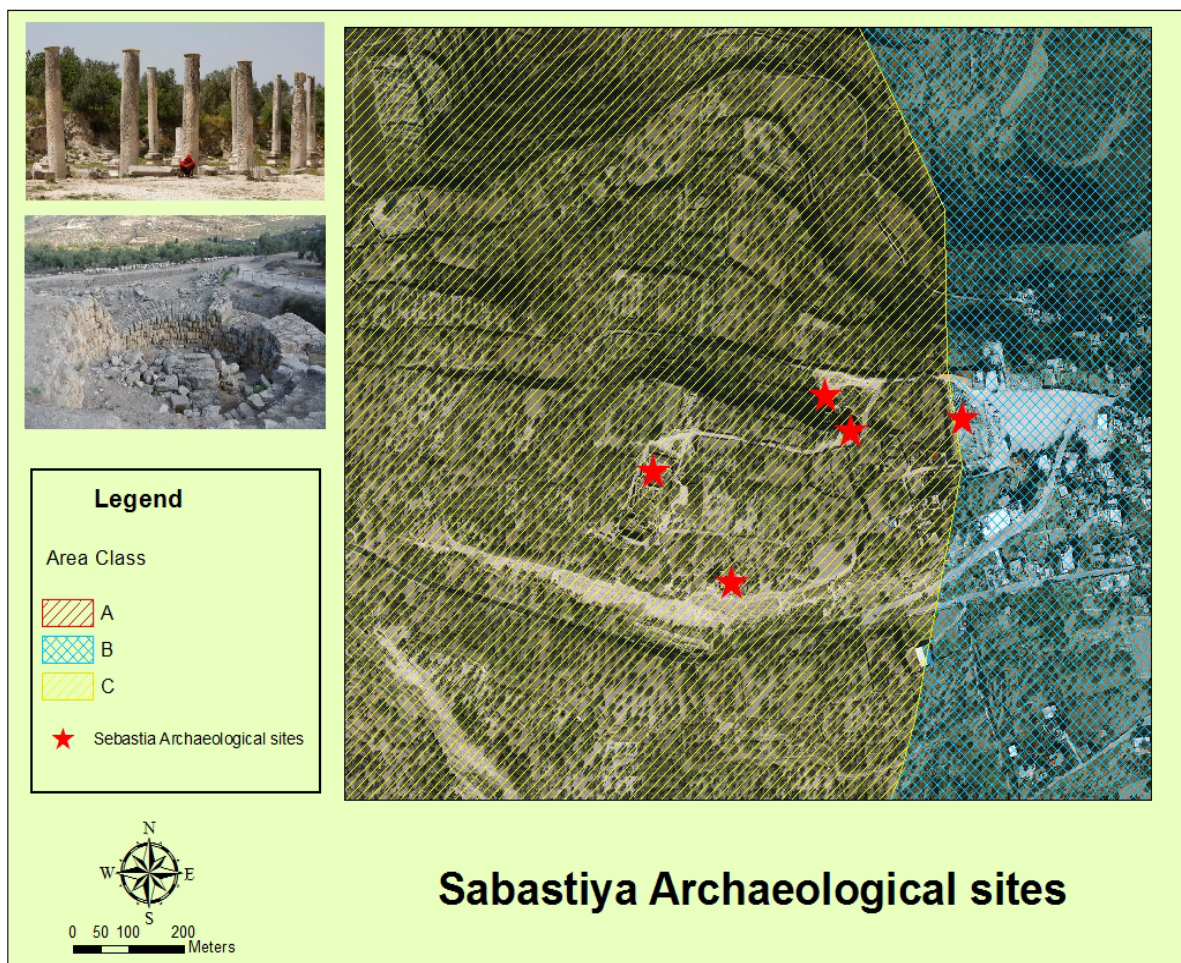


Figure 1. Map of Sabastiya Archaeological Sites

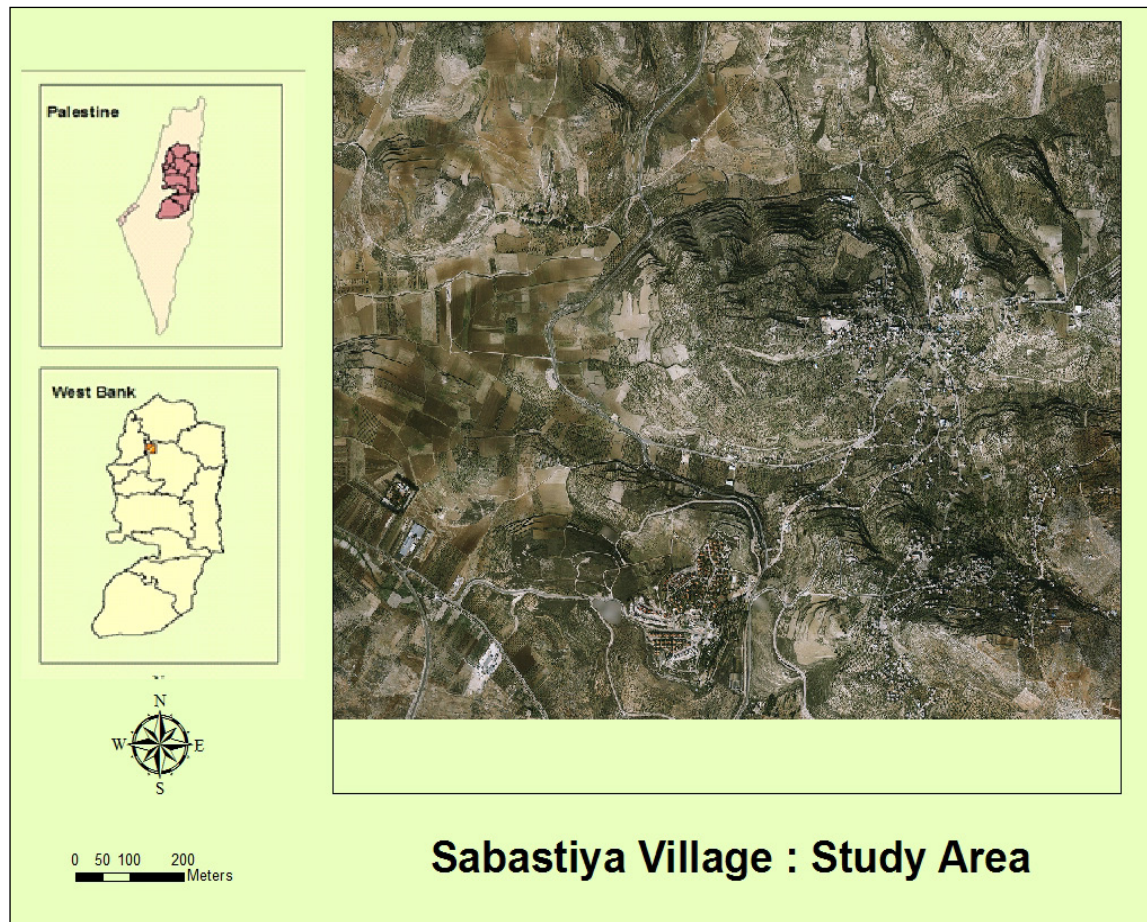


Figure 2. Study Area

Sabastiya today is a fascinating town with a population of mainly Muslims with a small Christian presence. Sabastiya relies on Nablus for many of its services and employment. The people of Sabastiya go to Nablus for hospital treatment and university education, but Israeli military checkpoints have made travelling difficult. Living under military occupation makes life challenging. Nevertheless, the people possess great spirit—education is perceived important, and many community initiatives exist. Sabastiya houses a mosaic center for teaching children art and producing crafts for sale. The village features two boys' schools, two girls' schools, one kindergarten, and youth groups, including scouts. Many olive groves surround Sabastiya, and they are used to produce fair trade olive oil. The women make olive oil soap and jam from the many fruit trees growing there. HAFSA indicated that a wonderful guest house was recently established to welcome travelers [27]. Figure 2 shows the study area and presents the location of Sabastiya village in Palestine.

2. Methodology

This study is based on different data collected from various organizations engaging in the tourism industry in

Palestine. The data were analyzed and used to reach the research objective. This study used guests' arrivals at Palestinian hotels during different years to explain the extent of challenge of tourism development in Palestine. The study employed a qualitative approach by interviewing tourism policy makers in the study area. A geographic information system (GIS) was utilized to show the geopolitical situation of the study area. Data were collected from different institutions and inputted into the GIS system to give readers maps to understand the political factor affecting the development of tourism in the study area.

3. Results and Discussion

This part discusses the opinions of policy makers in Sabastiya and a geopolitical map that provides several important implications for the area. The data confirmed that West Bank was divided into Areas A, B, and C. These areas influence tourism policy makers and planners in developing and establishing Palestine as an independent destination. The lack of structure of tourist areas affects the decision of foreign and domestic tourists to visit these areas. Figure 3 shows these three areas and the illegal Israeli settlement neighboring the study area.

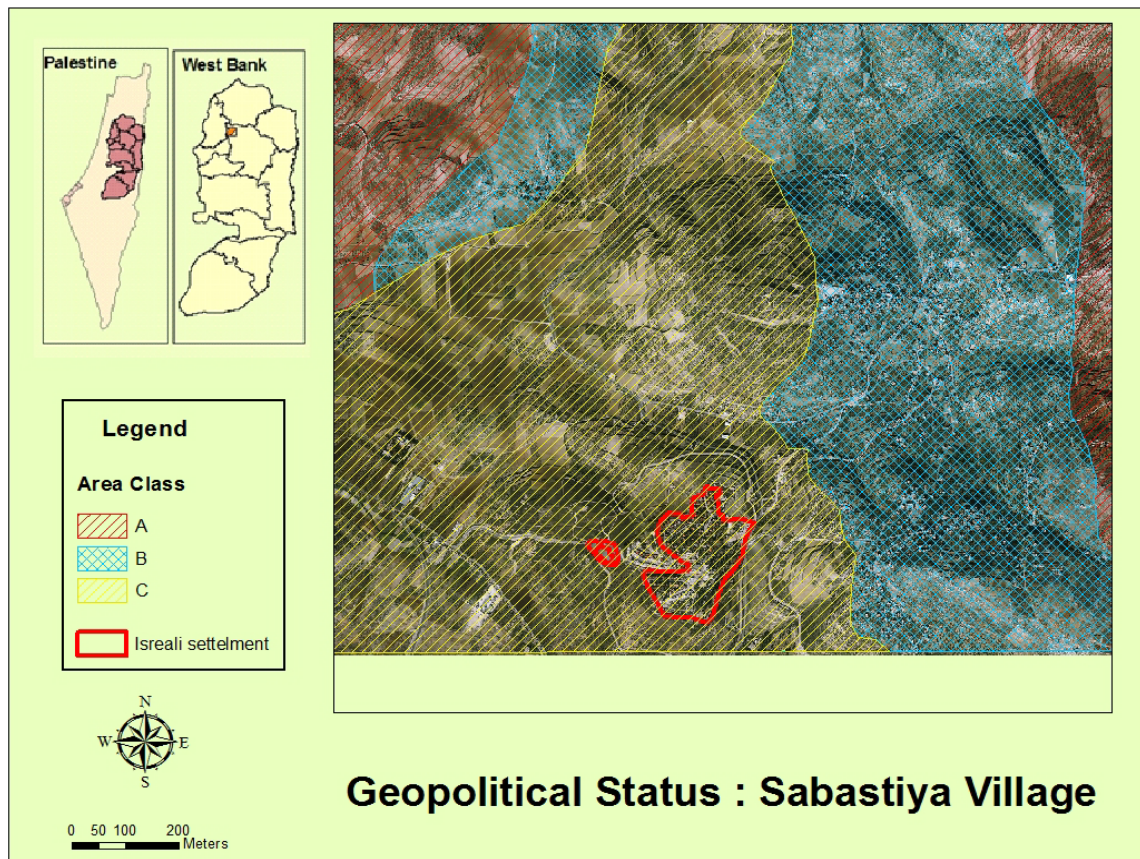


Figure 3. Geopolitical Status of Sabastiya

Policy makers mentioned that many owners Palestinian tourism businesses at Sabastiya Village, such as souvenir shops, restaurants, guest houses, and tour guides, are constantly negatively affected because of the few tourists visiting the area. Consequently, investors avoid this area, thus increasing the negative effects. Israeli occupation is considered the primary limiting factor for growth [23]. Israeli occupation also intervenes at Sabastiya Village, hindering the upcoming tourism plans from success. The role of the Palestinian government in most of the archeological area is restricted because of Israeli occupation. The government is not allowed to control of the area, resulting in inadequate utilities and economic activities in Sabastiya Village.

4. Conclusions

This study concluded that Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory is the major factor that negatively influences the Palestinian tourism sector. This research suggests two solutions that may overcome the challenges facing Sabastiya Village.

First, the Palestinian government must take responsibility for implementing improvements in Sabastiya. They must increase their attention to this area at local, regional, and international levels. The Palestinian government should also recruit the United Nations in establishing international momentum on this village and emphasizing their freedom for

entrepreneurialism in tourism. They should also demand the United Nations to pressure Israel to give the Palestinian government full control over all Palestinian territories and the entire Sabastiya. United States and European Union play an important role by pushing Israel to allow Palestinian government sovereignty of the entire area, thereby developing tourism in the village. Tourism opportunities can decrease poverty and violence by providing a ready-made economic path for Palestinians. Political factors are critical to tourism development in Palestine and thus should be kept firmly in mind by political decision makers.

Second, with inside intervention, namely, local community and other institutions at Sabastiya, many incentives can be offered for driving Palestinians to engage in tourism development and, at the same time, protect their archeological sites. Tourism can improve community infrastructure, services, and facilities. If commercial enterprises are locally owned and well managed, then the profits they make incentivize them to remain in their village. Institutions should take responsibility of learning new skills and technologies to enhance human resources in the village and transfer these acquired knowledge to their economic activities. This study suggests employing crisis management to face the challenges through cooperation between Palestinian private and public sectors. Palestinian institutions should spread awareness within the local community to encourage domestic and international tourism in the area. Many Palestinian and foreigners should show

solidarity with the suffering places in Palestine. This study recommends that efforts in this area should concentrate on tourist services, parking facilities, training of tourism staff, expansion of accommodations and restaurants, and own promotional services.

Sabastiya Village awaits sustainable tourism strategies in which the local community and stakeholders and other related partners are involved in the implementation of short- and mid-term tourism plans. Creating a tourism crisis management plan and guidebook is the most important recommendation of this study.

The aim of this study was to expose the effect for tourism in a context of occupation – with consequent restrictions on access and mobility of tourists and others to and within village. As revealed to tourism sector in Sabastiya village that without an end of the occupation it will be very hard to grow and develop tourism industry in the area of study.

The political situation in which Palestinian currently live in Sabastiya village continues to show major challenges and a continuation of the occupation has frustrating experience at all levels of Palestinians' lives.

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