



Palestine Unbound

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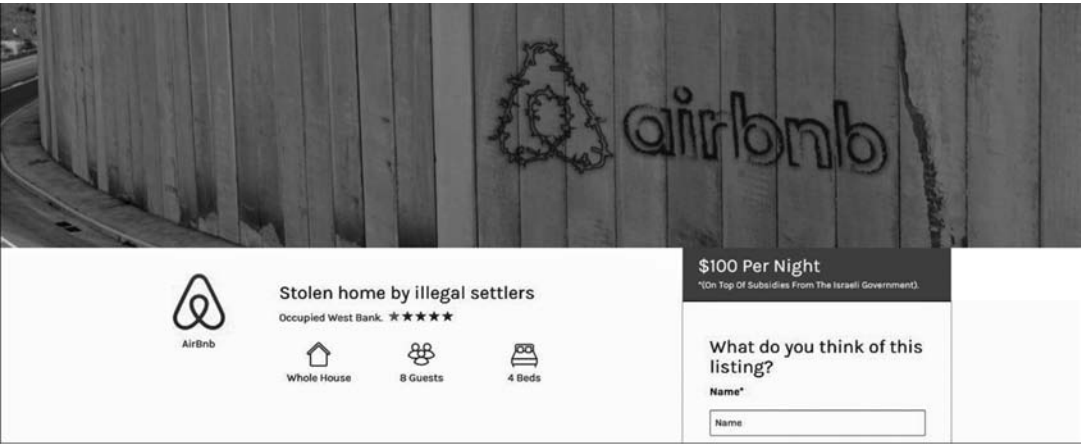
Palestine Unbound

Published each issue and updated regularly on *Palestine Square* (blog.palestine-studies.org), this section strives to capture the tenor and content of popular conversations related to the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Increasingly, these conversations are held on new and dynamic platforms unbound by traditional media. Therefore, items presented in this section are from a variety of sources and have been selected because they either have gone viral or represent a significant cultural moment or trend.

This Quarter's Topics

Airbnb's Settlement Getaways	72
Spoof <i>New York Times</i> "Supplement" on Israel-Palestine	75
#SkipTheTrip	77

Airbnb's Settlement Getaways



A satirical parody of an Airbnb site listing that offers visitors a four-bedroom “stolen home.” (Accessed 7 March, airbnb.sumofus.org)

Travelers looking to stay “minutes from Center City” in Jerusalem can find quite the steal on Airbnb. The vacation rental company offers a “quiet two bedroom apartment” for just \$65 a night or, for those with a bigger budget, a “luxury townhouse” at \$128 a night. What Airbnb does not note, however, is that these listings are located in illegal Israeli settlements.

In January, various news outlets reported that several of Airbnb’s listings in Israel are actually in settlement blocs or outposts in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Some of the listings are in expensive Jewish-only neighborhoods built with state funding, while others are in small, rural outposts

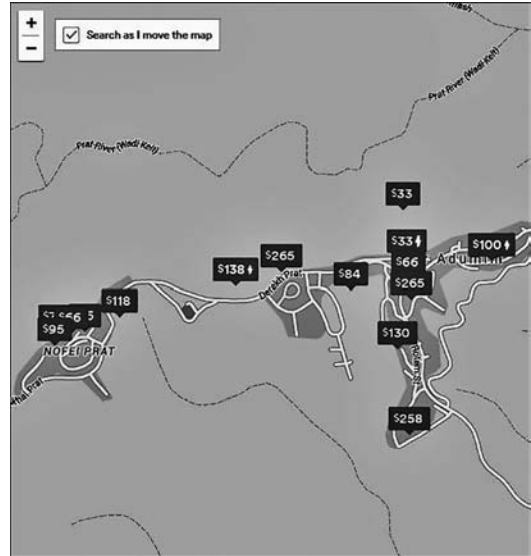
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constructed by individual Jewish settlers, which are illegal even under Israeli law. The listings in settlements like Kefar Eldad, Nokdim, Ma'ale Adumim, and Nofei Prat make no mention of the Israeli military checkpoints that guests would need to pass through in order to reach their destination, nor do they mention the occupation in any way.

In addition to offering rentals in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the company also features listings in Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus and the Moroccan-annexed Western Sahara, as highlighted by the Associated Press.

While there is no international consensus over the other disputed territories where Airbnb operates, Israeli settlements are illegal under international law, making Airbnb's listings in those areas susceptible to legal action. As John Dugard, international law professor and former UN special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, told the Guardian, vacationing in an Airbnb settlement rental "facilitates the commission of the crime of establishing settlements." Dugard argued that Airbnb could possibly be prosecuted in a European Union member country for "aiding and abetting" the crime since the company earns "money from property built on [an] illegal settlement."

Upon discovering that many of these listings were in Jewish-only communities, an Israeli blogger for the Hebrew online magazine Local Call wrote an investigative piece about discriminatory renting practices. Posing as a U.S. traveler of Palestinian descent under the pseudonym Haled, the blogger attempted to book a room through Airbnb at dozens of settlement listings, securing only one. Most Airbnb hosts he contacted apologetically noted that the "political situation" made them unable to offer him a room. The blogger was able to book a place in Tekoa, southeast of Bethlehem. Since the settlement is located in Israeli-controlled Area C, the host mentioned to his prospective guest that he would likely have to go through "a security check at the entrance of Tekoa" given the "tense situation in Israel." The article is available on Local Call's English-language sister publication, +972 Magazine.



Screenshot of Airbnb listings in the Nofei Prat and Kfar Adumim settlements. (10 January, Airbnb.com)

Hi! Im very sorry but i dont think that its possible.. its very sensitive here.. you know.. hope that in different life we could be a good friends.



An Airbnb host in the Tekoa settlement turns away Haled, a Palestinian-American persona created by Israeli bloggers to highlight discrimination in the hosting process. (7 January, +972 Magazine)

Airbnb's settlement listings have made the company a target for the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. On 20 January, the U.S.-based groups affiliated with the movement, American Muslims for Palestine, CODEPINK, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, and the U.S. Palestinian Community Network, launched the Stolen Homes campaign. Calling on Airbnb "to immediately stop listing vacation rentals in Israeli settlements, all of which [are] built on stolen Palestinian land and deemed illegal under international law," the campaign went viral on social media. Under the hashtag #StolenHomes, the groups circulated a petition on Twitter that lit up the boards and remains ongoing at the time of writing.

The coalition of BDS-affiliated groups also created a mock Airbnb webpage (airbnb.sumofus.org) marketing a house in the West Bank as "Stolen home by illegal settlers." The listing describes how the settlement rental "includes views of the West Bank Apartheid Wall," and warns that guests "who could be perceived as Arabs must be accompanied by armed guards while in the Settlement, for their own protection." The coalition highlights how settlement subsidies from the Israeli government help make the vacation rental affordable for non-Palestinians, costing Palestinians their homes, land, and freedom.

Pointing to the fact that many Palestinian families in the West Bank live in fear of home demolitions, commentators on the mock website criticized Airbnb's support of Israel's settlement enterprise as a lack of "civic responsibility." At this writing, 2,877 people had left comments on the site.

On 10 March, JVP and CODEPINK staged a protest outside Airbnb's San Francisco headquarters, where activists delivered a petition with more than 140,000 signatures calling on the company to end its listings in illegal Israeli settlements. An Airbnb representative accepted the petition, but the company demurred in a statement to the San Francisco Chronicle, "This particular issue is complex: people have been debating this matter for 5,000 years [sic], so a hospitality company from San Francisco isn't going to have all the answers but at the end of the day, we want to help open the world, not close it off." For her part, JVP deputy director Stefanie Fox told the Chronicle, "Airbnb has to stop enabling Israeli violations of international law. Whether Airbnb has a physical presence or not in the West Bank, they are still profiting off it. It's absolutely dirty money."



A tweet satirizing an Airbnb social media campaign. (10 February, Twitter)



JVP and CODEPINK activists protest outside of Airbnb's San Francisco headquarters, delivering a petition with over 140,000 signatures. (Facebook, 10 March)

Spoof *New York Times* “Supplement” on Israel-Palestine



An activist distributes a copy of the *New York Times* parody supplement on Israel and Palestine. (2 February, Twitter)

On 2 February, morning commuters across New York City received a free “supplement” to the day’s edition of the New York Times announcing changes to its coverage of Israel and Palestine. Activists from JVP and Jews Say No! (JSN) distributed 10,000 print copies of the parody to New Yorkers and some lucky “subscribers” even received the following notice of the policy change via e-mail:

Dear Valued Reader,

The *New York Times* has decided to make several changes in our editorial policy with regard to coverage of events in Israel-Palestine. These changes are an attempt to address both realities on the ground and the concerns readers have expressed about fairness in our coverage.

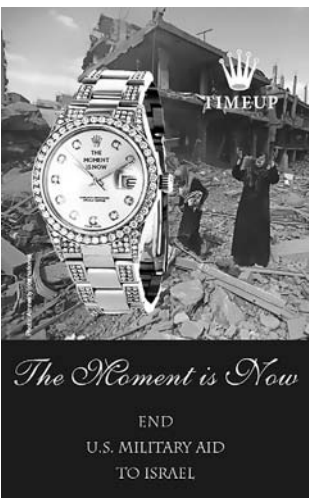
We want to hear your thoughts. Explore our new Israel-Palestine supplement and tell us what you think. Write to us at NewYorkTimes-IP@newyorktimes.com or join the conversation on Twitter.

Cleverly skewering the New York Times’s historic pro-Israel bias, the e-mail included an explanation of the policy change, purportedly written by the editorial board. It said that after spending months meeting with leaders of “Palestinian and Jewish peace organizations,” the board had come to the conclusion that past accusations of bias were “well-founded.”

The activists behind the project used statistics from the paper’s actual coverage of recent violence in the occupied territories and Israel as a poignant example of this bias: “It has come to our attention that, during the period of September–October 2015, eighteen headlines depicted Palestinians, while none depicted Israelis, as instigators of violence. . . . We used the word ‘terrorist’ to describe Palestinians 42 times, but only once to describe an Israeli.”

Titled “Rethinking our 2015 Coverage on Israel-Palestine: A Supplement,” the paper’s print and online readers found the day’s headlines complete with targeted advertisements and a “Corrections” section. As evidenced by their titles, the featured stories covered a range of issues—“IDF Generals Blame Israeli Government for Recent Violence,” “Congress to Debate U.S. Aid to Israel,” and “Mayor De Blasio Confronts Islamophobia Following Trip to Israel,” to name a few.

According to the news site Salon, activists from the New York chapter of JVP and JSN spent months writing and fact-checking the articles, composing the four-page paper, and building the website. The project’s Twitter account (@nyt_ip) and website were shut down by that evening, but later archived; it is still possible to view some of the articles at web.archive.org.



“All the news we didn’t print” is the satirical epigraph on the front page of the “supplement.”

The advertisements featured on the website lampooned U.S. military aid to Israel and the occupation.

Social media users shared the paper’s headlines on Facebook and Twitter throughout the launch day and countless U.S. news outlets picked up the story. It was not until the next day when JVP and JSN took credit for the stunt that speculation on its origins stopped.

On 4 February, JVP released a short video on the group’s YouTube page documenting the experience. Candace Graff, a member of the New York chapter, addressed the general issue of mainstream media bias, saying, “This isn’t just the New York Times. American media across the country all fail to give context to what’s going on in Palestine and Israel. And the context is this: It’s occupation, it’s siege, it’s discrimination—institutionalized violence by the state [of Israel] against the Palestinian people.”



New York-based solidarity groups and journalists wondered who was responsible for the satirical news project. (2 February, Twitter)

#SKIPTHETRIP

Nominees to the 2016 Academy Awards were announced on 14 January, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was immediately criticized for its lack of diversity. While the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite was trending on social media, and actors, producers, and directors of color were calling for a boycott of the awards ceremony, a related issue began making headlines.

In addition to disproportionately awarding white artists for their cinematic works, the Oscars also provides extravagant so-called swag bags. The gift bags, given to each Oscar nominee, were valued at over \$200,000, with this year’s bags including a \$55,000 trip to Israel.

In a press release on 7 February, the Israeli tourism ministry took responsibility for the idea. Tourism Minister Yariv Levin gushed about the great publicity that a Hollywood star’s trip to Israel would create for the state. “If they do indeed accept the invitation, their visit will have enormous resonance among millions of fans and followers.”

Israel’s blatant attempt to capitalize on Hollywood stars like Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence has also been criticized as an attempt to counter the growing popularity of the international BDS movement. As BDS efforts gain increased coverage in mainstream media outlets, forcing companies like Veolia, SodaStream, and Airbnb (see above) to address their complicity in the Israeli occupation and settlement enterprise, Israel and its supporters have been channeling millions of dollars into the state’s hasbara campaigns to boost Israel’s image internationally. In an attempt to depict Israel as a “relevant and modern” state, Brand Israel efforts are aimed at distracting consumers and travelers from the Israeli occupation and state discrimination against ethnoreligious minorities.



A popular meme shared on Twitter and Facebook as part of the #SkipTheTrip campaign.



Palestine solidarity groups sent Oscar nominees a sarcastic invitation. (26 February, U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation)

In the weeks leading up to the Oscars, Palestinian rights activists launched various campaigns to bring international attention to the issue. The Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN), a coalition of Palestinian artists and cultural groups, called on nominees to reject the Israeli government-sponsored trip, noting that “Israel deliberately attacks Palestinian art and cultural production.” Similarly, the Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC) pointed to the parallels between the Academy’s racism and Israel’s racist laws. “The news about the decision of the Academy to allow Israel to use the awards as a propaganda vehicle comes in the midst of the #OscarsSoWhite scandal,” said the BNC in a press release. “Israel has over 50 racist laws that directly discriminate against its indigenous Palestinian citizens on the basis of race.”

Ten days before the ceremony, the Academy unexpectedly disavowed the extravagant gift bags. The VIP trip and other absurd items—among them a “Vampire Breast Lift” and a portable vaporizer—led the Academy to file a lawsuit against Distinctive Assets, the company responsible for the gift bags. “Distinctive Assets has been falsely representing that its extravagant ‘gift bags’ [are] redistributed by the Academy, at its direction, or with its endorsement or approval,” an Academy spokesperson told Variety.

Variety also noted a solidarity campaign organized by Artists for Palestine UK, which called on Oscar nominees to “Give your bag to a Palestinian refugee!” Endorsing the campaign, director and five-time Oscar nominee Mike Leigh said, “I think the world would be happy to see Israeli government money used for once to make reparations to Palestinians—and I hope the stars will agree.” The U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation took similar action, launching a #SkipTheTrip social media campaign and an online petition that garnered almost 10,000 signatures in the first week.

In a collaborative effort, Artists for Palestine UK, PPAN, JVP, and the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation offered their own gift to the Oscar nominees. They sent them sarcastic invitations to visit Palestine and experience the Israeli occupation firsthand. The invitations were sent to the nominees’ representatives via e-mail. (Nominees Mark Rylance and Asif Kapadia had already signed pledges to decline both professional invitations to Israel and funding from institutions linked to the Israeli government.)

In the days leading up to the 28 February ceremony, Palestine solidarity groups continued their work to push Oscar nominees to decline the trip to Israel. On 24 February, the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation and JVP published a full-page #SkipTheTrip advertisement in the Los Angeles Times. Variety, in which the ad was originally slated to appear, rejected it at the last minute after having accepted payment from JVP earlier that week.



Los Angeles Times ad by U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation and JVP calling on Oscar nominees to decline the trip to Israel. (25 February, Twitter)