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Sports Final Edition; All Editions**Palestinians** endure hardships to go home;
Each year, **Palestinians** long to go home again**BYLINE:** Robert L. Smith, Plain Dealer Reporter**SECTION:** NATIONAL; Pg. A1**LENGTH:** 1133 words

The Ahmad family's annual summer **vacation** never goes according to plan. They brace themselves for petty annoyances, the occasional catastrophe.

A surly soldier at a checkpoint. A sudden roadblock. A riot.

But this year's journey tested their resolve like none before.

A departing bus ride to

the airport in Tel Aviv from

the family home in the West Bank - a drive into Israel that should have taken about an hour - dragged across 18 hot hours.

Mom and Dad's fistful of travel documents, de rigueur for a **Palestinian** family visiting the occupied homeland, always seemed to be missing something critical in the eyes of an Israeli, **Palestinian** or Jordanian border guard.

"This year was the worst treatment ever," said Freddie Ahmad, still fuming six days after returning home to Westlake.

But the conversation in a household busy with children and grandchildren quickly turned to a new topic: next year's trip to the West Bank.

The Ahmads and their nine children belong to one of the most relentless **vacation**-going groups in America: **Palestinian** families who return year after year to the biblical villages from whence they came.

Each summer, come peace or holy war, they pack their bags and chart a course to Beit Hanina, where grandparents keep the home fires burning. They join a migration that departs from **Palestinian**-American population centers like Northeast Ohio with the sureness of a tide.

Palestinian tourism officials do not know how many **Palestinian** Americans return each year, partly due to the **Palestinian** Authority's limited control over its borders. **Palestinian** tourists at various times answer to Israeli, **Palestinian** and Jordanian jurisdictions.

Still, the impact of the returning expatriates is noticeable. West Bank villages enjoy a rising summer economy with the infusion of American cash, and even Israeli tour operators tap the market, offering Sea of Galilee cruises with Arabic music.

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Freddie Ahmad, a pharmacist for Marc's in Rocky River, estimates some 500 **Palestinians** from Greater Cleveland were visiting Beit Hanina, an ancient village just north of Jerusalem, the same time as his family.

One morning, the family boarded a bus filled with **Palestinian** families from Lakewood, Westlake, Rocky River and North Olmsted for a Holy Land tour to the Sea of Galilee.

In markets, they bought dates and olives from savvy **Palestinian** vendors who asked, "How about those Indians?"

And they returned to America feeling fulfilled if not refreshed.

"It's very hard - it's a hard trip for us," acknowledged Ahmad, 47, whose West Bank roots run five generations deep.

His wife, Suad, who wears the head scarf of the modest Muslim woman in her modern suburban home, said the demanding **vacations** expose her children to things they must see. Arabic culture. Islamic values. Their place in the Holy Land.

"We're **Palestinian**," she said. "That's why we must go."

The departures begin in early June, when Cleveland's Little Arabia neighborhood along Lorain Avenue starts to look off-season. A note in a darkened shop window might read in Arabic, "Gone to Palestine." More often, a brother has replaced the owner behind the counter.

"My family goes this year so his can go next year," explained Naser Assad, who runs a two-bay garage and used car lot, Auto Depot USA, on West 117th Street near Lorain Avenue.

Assad illustrates some of the complexities of **Palestinian** ties to the Holy Land. He was born into the **Palestinian** Diaspora, in Venezuela, and moved to America at age 16. He has never lived in the place he calls home.

Yet his family roots in the West Bank stretch back 1,000 years, he said. He inherited his grandparents' home in Beit Hanina, with its olive trees planted by Romans, and met his wife, Raeda, in nearby Ramallah.

The couple feels compelled to return with their four children as often as possible.

"How can I forget my house?" Assad asks. "How can I forget my grandfather's stories? We're proud Americans, but life is a balance."

Maintaining equilibrium means enduring a traveler's nightmare.

Palestinian-Americans usually visit the Holy Land on U.S. or **Palestinian** passports. Neither guarantees them complete freedom to roam, but the U.S. passport offers broader access.

Families often go for a month or two on Israeli visitor visas, which are routinely issued to Americans, and return before the new school year.

Even the best-laid plans will go awry. The West Bank is choked with more than 600 military checkpoints. Travel permits vary in effectiveness within regions and within families.

Khalid Bahhur, the **Palestinian**-born commissioner of Burke Lakefront Airport, was allowed to visit Jerusalem this summer but his wife, Feda, had to stay behind in El Bireh, where they own a home. Her **Palestinian** ID does not allow her to enter areas under Israeli control.

More frustrating still, rules can change abruptly, depending on the security situation but also on the temperament of the Israeli soldier holding all the power.

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Freddie Ahmad had bought his family tickets to fly home from Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport. All the children carried the same travel documents, but a border guard stopped his 17-year-old son, Mohammed, and refused to let him pass.

The whole family was rerouted through Jordan, a checkpoint-clogged detour that consumed 18 hours and forced them to miss their flights and spend \$4,000 on new plane tickets, Ahmad said.

He and other **Palestinian**-Americans see purposeful harassment.

"The Israelis make it hard, to be honest, so we don't go back," Naser Assad said.

Israel supporters blame terrorism. Louis Malcmacher, chairman of the community relations committee of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, travels to Israel two or three times a year.

He said extraordinary precautions are made necessary by **Palestinian** suicide bombers and complicate his visits, too.

"The fact that they can go back there and have a safe visit is because of that security," he said. "Instead of blaming the Israelis, they should start looking at Al Aqsa and all the terrorist groups that still try to get through."

While local Jews and Arabs might debate who's to blame for the hardships, they agree on one point: The visits are worth it.

The Ahmads settled into their grandparents' home for much of June and July. Seven-year-old Adam, the youngest, had an Arabic tutor. Dad gained weight.

The whole family rose for dawn prayer and walked three miles around the Beit Hanina soccer field, enjoying the morning serenity with neighbors.

Elsewhere, the intifada might rage, but its echoes fade in a village that has always been theirs.

Rema Ahmad, who is 21, did not go this year. The violence concerns her. Her son, Ahmad, is only 2.

Next year, she vows.

"We have to do it," she said. "It's our home and they won't stop us from going back. I feel like my son has to know where he's from."

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GRAPHIC: MARVIN FONG THE PLAIN DEALER Suad Ahmad prepares plenty of koussa miheshy - stuffed squash - for family dinners at her Westlake home. She and her husband, Freddie, have nine children ages 7 to 25 and 10 grandchildren. Many of the kids join them on their summer **vacations** to the occupied West Bank.

COURTESY OF FREDDIE AHMAD Members of the Ahmad family posed before the Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest sites in Islam, last month in Jerusalem. From left are Mohammed, 17, cousin Abdula Abdelhamid, Asad, 16, cousin Muhammed Abdelhamid, grandfather Asad Ahmad, Adam, 7, uncle Walid Abdelhamid and Ashraf, 10.

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