

# Tourism Trends in the MENA Region

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Deserts, harsh climates and unique ethno-religious heritages characterize the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). MENA's cultural and natural geographies make it one of the most dynamic tourism regions in the Mediterranean Basin. It is home to extreme natural environments and ageless living and built heritage. These assets together create a region with unmistakable tourism appeal. MENA is simultaneously blessed with rich resources that appeal to a wide range of tourist types and beset with problems that challenge not only tourism development. Under the broader concepts of geopolitics, heritage diversity, environmental hardships and emerging opportunities, this contribution briefly examines some of the opportunities and challenges that influence tourism in the region.

## Geopolitics

Perhaps the most notable tourism-related feature in MENA is the volatile security landscape, which affects tourism growth and development more than any other force. Current and recent wars have essentially halted international tourism in several countries, although limited domestic tourism continues to function in them, as do the activities of a small number of extreme adventurers looking to visit active war zones. International embargoes against Iran have diminished international arrivals there. The diplomatic crisis (2017-present) between Qatar and several other MENA countries has reduced intraregional tour-

ism considerably, and deliberate terror attacks against tourist targets in Egypt and Tunisia immediately rendered those countries unsafe to visit. Likewise, the Arab Spring (2010-2011) resulted in the overthrow of governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, ongoing conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen, and public protests in nearly every other country in the region, some of which resulted in major government, legal and policy changes (Timothy, 2019).

Some countries have adopted extensive tourism recovery efforts to re-elevate tourism for economic development. Lebanon has had to recover from its 1975-1990 civil war, although the ongoing conflict in Syria continues to influence Lebanon's image abroad. Syria's civil war has also affected tourism in neighbouring Jordan and Turkey owing to fears of a spillover. In response to tourist-targeted terror attacks, Tunisia and Egypt have taken major strides in recovery marketing to rebrand themselves as recuperated destinations that are now safe to visit.

Besides deterring would-be tourists, conflicts have resulted in other tourism-related outcomes. For example, the Middle East wars, particularly those in Iraq and Syria, have been especially destructive to the region's cultural heritage. Many ancient monuments were intentionally targeted by extremists for their destruction. Museums and historic sites have been extensively looted and artifacts sold illicitly to fund warfare. Many other sites have been devastated as non-targeted casualties of war. Many ancient heritage scapes of the Middle East have been destroyed beyond repair, costing not only important historical records but also the future livelihoods of people who had previously depended on tourism.

Another outcome of Middle East conflicts is the development of unusual types of tourism. Adventure-some tourists visiting active war zones, mentioned earlier, is one example. This occurs in Iraq, Syria and

Afghanistan regularly. Another tourism type is referred to as “solidarity tourism.” The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while causing periodic downturns in international arrivals, has stimulated a travel phenomenon known as “solidarity tourism,” although this is not endemic to this region. This involves people traveling to the “Holy Land” either to support the cause of Israel or the cause of Palestine. Large numbers of Christians visit Palestinians in the West Bank to demonstrate solidarity and empathy for their plight under Israeli occupation. Other evangelical Christian groups, usually from Europe and North America, are passionate supporters of Israel and its position in the conflict (Ron & Timothy, 2019).

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### Heritage Diversity

More than any other asset, cultural heritage is the nucleus of tourism in MENA. The region is rich in intangible and living culture, ancient ruins and monuments, large urban areas, colonial architecture and rural communities, all of which have become synonymous with tourism. Despite its history of dissonance and contestation, the colonial legacy of the region has mixed British, French, Ottoman, Spanish and even Italian influences with Arab architectural, culinary, administrative and celebratory traditions that have contributed to a unique cultural landscape that underscores much of MENA’s tourism.

The region is home to world-class ancient monuments and archaeological sites, many of which have been inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List and reflect the imprints of successive inter-millennial empires that have ruled North Africa and the Levant. Intangible heritage is an important part of the region’s

tourism sector as well, particularly as manifested in faith, language, music, dance, handicraft traditions, nomadism, social networks and the instinctive “Arab hospitality,” which has become well-known throughout the world.

Owing to the region’s vast arid environments and lack of water resources, the majority of countries in MENA have highly urbanized populations. Cities have become centres for tourism, not only as gateways to individual nations through the massive development of mega-airports, but also as crucibles of commerce, business and leisure tourism. The ancient cities of MENA still exude an aura of mystique and “Oriental Otherness,” which appeals to many people’s senses of adventure and romanticism.

The most important form of heritage tourism for the region at large is religious tourism, or pilgrimage (Ron & Timothy, 2019). Pilgrimage is an ancient phenomenon that has existed in the Middle East and North Africa for millennia. As the hearth of the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), the Middle East is a major destination for many of the world’s faithful.

Saudi Arabia is home to the Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, the holiest site in the world for Muslims, where approximately 2.5 million congregate each year during the *hajj* pilgrimage to satisfy the demands of their religion. Other Muslim pilgrimages take place at Medina, Saudi Arabia and in Jerusalem at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Most Muslim pilgrims are not permitted to visit the Jerusalem site because it is controlled by Israel, and travel to Israel is forbidden for citizens of most MENA countries. There are many other sites in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and in North Africa that are important Muslim pilgrimage attractions.

Likewise, there are numerous sites in Israel, Palestine and a handful of other MENA countries that are, or could be, important destinations for Jewish travellers from Israel and from the wider Jewish diaspora. Although there are important Christian holy sites in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, the majority of Christian religious travel takes place in Israel, Palestine and Egypt, with Jordan and Turkey being important secondary destinations in the “Holy Land.” The potential for Christian religious heritage-based tourism in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is enormous but underutilized because of ongoing conflict and insecurity (Ron & Timothy, 2019).

## Environmental Challenges

While conflict is the biggest immediate challenge in MENA, environmental pressures are also critical. Some countries' overdependence on oil and gas has created an unbalanced socio-economic environment leading to overdevelopment, especially in the Gulf states (Timothy, 2019). Climate change has many effects on the region. Since the mid-twentieth century, warmer days and nights, intensified heat-waves and increased dryness have been observed throughout MENA (Hall, 2019). The major implications for these changes include increased water scarcity, sea level rise, coral bleaching, algal blooms and extreme weather events.

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Tourism is a water-intensive industry. Reductions in water resources are expected to increase competition and tension between tourism and other sectors. Importing and desalination is expensive but perhaps the only options for many countries who rely on tourism as an important economic sector. Rising seas are expected to continue affecting beach-based tourism and coastal areas, as well as built environments. Coral bleaching is a growing problem in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, with some estimates suggesting the disappearance of Red Sea coral within the next 30 years (Hall, 2019). Extreme events, such as heat-waves, floods and droughts also appear to be increasing in MENA, affecting not only tourism but everyday life for its citizens.

## Emerging Opportunities and Patterns

Several countries in the Arabian Gulf, whose rentier economies have long relied on oil and natural gas revenue, now realize the need to diversify their economies beyond these finite natural resources. Some

states have started turning to tourism as an alternative growth strategy, most notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Bahrain (Stephenson & al-Hamarneh, 2017). While some countries in MENA (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) have been reluctant to focus on tourism as an economic development strategy, other countries have embraced it. Some states' reluctance to welcome traditional tourists derives from the negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism, such as immoral behaviour and disrespect for local traditions. Nevertheless, several recent trends have emerged that differ from traditional tourism in the region but which reflect rapid modernization, a globalizing marketplace and the recognized need for a more diversified economic foundation.

The UAE, Qatar and Bahrain have engaged in hyperdevelopment and capacious urbanization led by the construction of mega-malls, expansive housing estates and ultra-luxury apartment complexes. These three countries have focused their attention on high-end, luxury forms of tourism, including shopping, medical tourism, sport tourism, mega-events, MICE tourism (business tourism), and second home tourism. Part of these practices have included developing the most superlative attractions and structures with such descriptors as "the largest," "the highest," "the newest," or "the only."

Part of this hyperreal transition has been the development of air transport hubs and international airlines that compete to be among the best air service providers, having the best routes and guaranteeing the best safety records. Qatar Airways, Etihad and Emirates are now rated among the world's best airlines, and their hubs in Doha, Abu Dhabi and Dubai are among the most famous transit locations in the world. In addition to their transportation roles, these airports reflect the hyperreal development endemic to the region, including hotels, shopping centres, sports venues and other characteristics of the modern concept of "airport-cum-mega-mall" (Timothy, 2019).

In addition to air travel, the cruise sector has seen considerable growth in MENA in recent years. While several coastal countries in the region continue to eschew this sector, others have welcomed it. Cruise tourism in MENA takes place in four general regions: the Mediterranean coast, the Nile River, the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf. The Mediterranean has long been a popular cruise region, and ports in MENA states, such as Turkey, Israel and Morocco have been

leading Mediterranean cruise destinations for many years. Tunisia and Egypt have more recently appeared on the Mediterranean cruise map. Nile River cruises are gaining popularity, especially with increasing numbers of ports in the south. Red Sea cruises include stops in several of Egypt's coastal resorts and Aqaba, Jordan, from which land packages to Petra and sites in Israel are important. A limited number of cruises also call at the port of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In MENA, the cruise sector continues to see the most growth in the Arabian Gulf, with ports in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE and Oman receiving increased numbers of cruise ships in recent years.

## The UAE, Qatar and Bahrain have focused their attention on high-end, luxury forms of tourism

### Conclusion

MENA is a dynamic part of the Mediterranean region with unique physical and cultural characteristics. Many countries are salient tourist destinations, while others suffer from conflict-tainted images or environmental challenges that suppress their tourism potential. While

some elect not to develop tourism, most now accept it as an eventuality. Cultural heritage lies at the traditional core of MENA's tourism, although this has recently been augmented by hyper-urbanization, cruises, medical tourism, shopping, transit tourism, desert safaris and even snow skiing in Morocco, Algeria and Turkey. Despite its inherent political and ecological volatility, MENA has considerable tourism potential that remains largely unrealized, but which will become increasingly important in the years to come.

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