

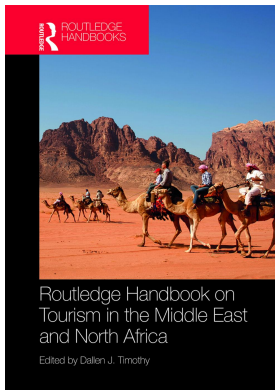
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CONCLUSION

Future research directions

Dallen J. Timothy

That the Middle East and North Africa is an attractive region with considerable tourism potential is undeniable. This book examines many of the natural and cultural characteristics that make MENA an attractive destination but also realistically looks at the many complications that keep much of the region from flourishing. These include geopolitical turmoil, religious contention and environmental challenges. There are many recent opportunities and industry trends, however, that are unique in this region and have the potential to stimulate tourism growth. Supplementing the traditional pilgrimage and religious tourism, as well as cultural heritage-based tourism, new products and spaces have emerged in recent years to take centre stage.

The cruise sector, for example, is growing, even though it is not accepted across the board the way it often is in other realms. Nevertheless, more coastal states are becoming involved in it and see it as a viable tourism alternative (Karolak 2015). Recent recommendations suggest that cruises should be considered in MENA as a vacation opportunity for the growing Muslim leisure market, who often travel in larger family groups and who desire a wider array of Muslim-friendly destinations and products (Dowling & Weeden 2017). Likewise, the upward trend in halal tourism reflects increasing numbers of Arabs and Muslims from other areas choosing to spend their holidays in MENA. This is in large part a result of fears of a perceived growing post-September 11 Islamophobia in the West.

The association between medical tourism and the Middle East has long centred on the notion of affluent Middle Easterners travelling to Europe or Southeast Asia for treatment and recovery. Malaysia has been a favoured destination owing to its competent and Muslim physicians and staff members who will practise according to Islamic requirements (Ormond 2013). However, medical tourism is on the rise in certain MENA countries that are becoming known for high-quality health care and well-qualified medical staff (Connell 2011). Shopping tourism is thriving in several countries, especially in the Gulf States, where retail is an inseparable part of the hyper-urban development still unfolding in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. Traditional Arab *souqs* have long been sought out by visitors from abroad throughout MENA and continue to be an important part of the urban heritage milieu of the region (King-irani 2006; Zaidan 2016), but they are in many cases becoming pigeonholed against the proliferation of the mega shopping mall. Business travel, or MICE tourism, is increasing in stature in the Middle East as well, particularly paralleling the development of high-end tourism and



hyper-urbanisation in the Gulf States (Al-Hamarneh 2005). Since the discovery of fossil fuels, business travel has been an important part of the tourism repertoire, even in countries where 'tourism' did not officially exist. Now, however, it is becoming an increasingly important market segment targeted by several countries in the region.

Domestic and intra-regional travel

The majority of chapters in this volume have used a reasonably persuasive supply-side approach to describe tourism assets and issues. This largely reflects the availability of information on resources, products and places in MENA. Fewer meta-data are available about tourism demand on a regional level, and some countries provide no statistics at all. Most academic studies focus on inbound tourism to the region and to individual countries, yet we know that domestic tourism and intra-regional travel are also an important part of human mobility in both the Middle East and North Africa. More than a decade ago, Robinson (2007) lamented that very little research had been done up to that point on domestic and intra-regional tourism in MENA and that knowledge about it was scarce. This reality remains the same in 2018–2019, although a handful of case studies since the early 2000s have looked at domestic tourism in individual countries in very descriptive ways (e.g. Abu Tayeh & Mustafa 2011; Al-Badi, Tarhini, & Al-Sawaei 2017; Alipour, Kilic, & Zamani 2013; Ghaderi 2011; Mustafa 2012; Shemma 2014; Singh & Krakover 2015; Soliman 2011).

Conceptually rich and theoretically grounded studies have yet to be undertaken on subnational travel in MENA. Despite the growing collection of published case studies, there is still a vital need to understand domestic tourism and cross-national patterns throughout the region that make it different from other parts of the world. While domestic tourism manifests in many ways, it generally concentrates on family visits to beaches and coastal areas, shopping, religious tourism, cultural festivals, and visiting friends and relatives (VFR) (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner 2004; Bogari, Crowther, & Marr 2003; Daher 2007; Sönmez 2001; Timothy 2005).

Other manifestations of domestic tourism remain under-researched, although they certainly exist. The larger states, such as Morocco, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia have vast natural and cultural reserves and distant localities that appeal to their citizens. These countries possess bountiful getaway opportunities in the domestic context, but what about the smaller countries? Still unknown in MENA (and everywhere throughout the world actually) is how residents of the geographically smallest states (i.e. Bahrain, Qatar, Israel, Palestine, Tunisia, Lebanon and Kuwait) perceive domestic tourism. Leisure activities that might not be reckoned strictly as domestic 'tourism' in the larger countries (e.g. day trips to the coast or visits to amusement parks, shopping malls and museums) because they do not conform to the 'official' UNWTO definition of overnight stays, may necessarily be the only configuration of 'domestic tourism' in the geographically challenged small states. In this instance, distance and scale are the only variables differentiating between small-state domestic tourism and that in larger nations.

Outbound tourism from MENA has also been comparatively neglected by researchers, and far fewer data are available. Traditionally, most incoming tourists headed to the poorer countries of the region with few interested in visiting the rentier countries of the Gulf (Daher 2007). Citizens of the wealthier Gulf States, however, have long dominated outbound travel. During the 1970s, the countries of the Arabian Gulf became wealthy by selling their petroleum resources, and systems were established to share that prosperity amongst their citizenry. This newfound affluence enabled Kuwaitis, Saudis, Emiratis, Qataris and Bahrainis to travel

extensively throughout the entire world, with Europe and North America being their preferred destinations. Most outbound travel from the Gulf was geared towards high-end experiences for shopping, beach vacations, casinos and even health care. MENA's wealthy became accustomed to visiting Europe on lavish vacations, and families travelled regularly to exotic and faraway places. Even visits to other countries in the Middle East entailed highly frolicsome and leisure holiday choices (Daher 2007; Mumuni & Mansour 2014).

The terror events of 11 September 2001 were a major turning point for Middle Eastern tourists. Right away, many cancelled their journeys abroad or changed their plans to visit other Muslim countries in Asia or the Middle East that appeared to be more welcoming. Owing to perceptions of an escalating climate of Islamophobia in non-Muslim countries, largely exacerbated by the media, many people chose not to visit Europe or North America for fear they would be unwelcomed in the Western world and might face retaliatory action (Robinson 2007; Steiner 2010). These avoidance behaviours lasted several years into the 2000s, and in fact, they still continue today, albeit to a much lesser degree.

This event prompted a re-evaluation of Arabs' travel decisions, destination choices and expectations. Many people reoriented their travel interests to focus on Muslim-friendly holiday destinations, especially those closer to home. While there is a long history of intra-regional tourism, for example Algerians, Libyans and Moroccans visiting Tunisia (Carboni, Perelli, & Sistu 2014), regional travel benefited considerably from the downturn in long-haul outbound journeys. This hastened the development of halal tourism and Islamic tourism in response to the growing demand for Muslim-friendly vacations and sharia-compliant services (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson 2010). In their minds, Middle Easterners can have the leisure experiences they desire, even in their own region in a Muslim-friendly environment (Battour, Ismail, & Battor 2010; Henderson 2010)—something on which they might have earlier had to compromise in visiting Europe and the Americas. By staying in MENA, they can even enjoy beach vacations, which many more conservative Muslims are reluctant to do in the West. For the most part, the beaches of MENA are safe spaces where modesty is honoured and where women can wear modest beach attire (e.g. burkinis) without standing out from the crowd or receiving undue attention.

Regional travel is often cheaper than long-haul trips, but not always. In fact, sometimes cross-border travel may be less expensive than vacationing in the homeland. For example, in some of the wealthier countries, lodging, food and transportation can be quite expensive. Thus, journeying to cheaper countries in the region, including Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, can be a cost-effective alternative to domestic holidays (Mustafa 2012). Thus, even within MENA, there is a 'north-south' pattern of development and tourist flow.

Religion and tourism

Several chapters in this book have addressed the market(s) for the products of Middle East tourism. Per capita, it is the most visited realm in the world amongst religious tourists/pilgrims of several different faiths (Timothy & Olsen 2006). Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and formerly Syria, are extremely important destinations for Christian travellers. Saudi Arabia plays a special part in Islamic pilgrimages as a required destination, while Iraq, Iran and Syria are also prominent Muslim destinations. While few Jews travel specifically for religious pilgrimage (Cohen Ioannides & Ioannides 2006), there are several types of tourism that attract them to Israel from throughout the global diaspora, and there are Jewish heritage sites throughout MENA that could feature more prominently as destinations if political conditions allowed it.

Much has been written about Islamic, Jewish and Christian travel to and within the Middle East. Yet, as Chapter 3 indicated, the region is home to other religions and many subsets beyond these three. Understanding the religious travel patterns amongst Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist guest workers could help expatriate associations better serve the needs of immigrant employees. Raising such questions can also place these religions' adherents into the mainstream population of MENA and provide insight into how they might use Middle Eastern religious assets as attractions as they themselves undertake regional holidays.

There are other homegrown faiths whose beliefs, practices, structures and festivities have relationships to tourism. Druze, Samaritanism, Zoroastrianism and the Bahá'í Faith all originated in MENA and remain strongest there. All of these belief systems have shrines and historic sites that devotees revere and to which they travel for adulation or celebratory purposes. They also contribute to the overall cultural milieu that helps make this region inimitable amongst regions. Aside from the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, which is a major UNESCO and religious attraction in that city (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell 2006), these faith-based heritages have all but been ignored by scholars, even if the faiths wish not to be part of tourism beyond their pilgrimage mandates. Although of secondary importance in tourism, or having no relationship at all, these other faiths contribute to a diverse cultural landscape that gives the Middle East its flavour and sense of identity.

Diasporas

MENA is the source of many significant diasporas. Diaspora tourism, sometimes referred to as return travel, represents emigrants and/or their descendants travelling back to the original motherland for a variety of purposes—visiting relatives, religious ceremonies, festivals and events, reunions, genealogy and family history research, and more. This can involve first-generation emigrants (those who migrated) or any of their progeny of subsequent generations (Coles & Timothy 2004b). The most prominent diaspora is the Jews. They are more widespread around the world than any other nationality or group from the region, and they have one of the most noteworthy histories. There are far more Jews outside of Israel than there are within. Outside of Israel, the United States, France, Canada, the United Kingdom and Russia have the largest Jewish populations, but Jews dwell in most countries of the world including many in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Return visits to Israel have many purposes, including bar/bat mitzvah celebrations, holiday observance, family visits, religious rites, funerals, and visits to tombs, temples and holy sites (Collins-Kreiner & Olsen 2004; Ioannides & Ioannides 2004). Birthright Israel is a unique type of diaspora tourism that enables Jewish youth to visit their native soil in order to learn about the state, Israeli identity and Jewish traditions. The journeys are funded by various private organisations and the State of Israel as a means of educating and building solidarity with Israel amongst diasporic youth (Brin 2006; Cohen 2004; Kelner 2010).

There are many other Middle Eastern diasporas that receive less academic attention. The Lebanese diaspora includes millions of people of Lebanese descent living in numerous countries. Most, however, are concentrated in South and North America, Australia and other Middle Eastern countries. While the majority of Lebanese emigres are Christians, there are also large populations of Muslim, Druze and Jewish Lebanese living outside the homeland.

There are people of every MENA descent living in various parts of the world, many driven from their homeland by war and violence, others by economic necessity or family ties. Several, however, such as Jews and Lebanese, stand out amongst the most populous and influential. Additionally, there is a sizeable Moroccan diaspora across Europe, an Algerian

community in France, and a Palestinian diaspora scattered throughout the Middle East and the Americas. There is a large Turkish diaspora in neighbouring countries and throughout Europe, especially Germany, and Iranians can be found dispersed throughout most of the world with the highest concentration in the United States. These and many smaller ones contribute significantly to their motherland economies through remittances and return tourism. For example, much of Lebanon's tourism industry is sustained by diasporic Lebanese returning to visit relatives and the motherland (Abdelhady 2011; Hourani 2007). In the same way, much of Israel's tourism economy is dependent on Jewish tourists visiting Israel from every corner of the globe.

The idea of diasporas and tourism raises many questions that scholars have yet to address adequately. Many diasporic populations endure prejudice and intolerance in their adopted lands. Perhaps even more common, however, is a 'hyphenated identity' (e.g. Lebanese-American, Moroccan-Dutch, Iranian-Canadians), which causes many people, including downline younger generations, to feel unrooted and in a perpetual state of in-betweenness, belonging neither to the homeland of their roots nor to the adopted land where they were born or to which they immigrated (Coles & Timothy 2004a). How does this condition play out in their travel choices? Can visiting the homeland help heal the chasm in their identities? Does tourism help them preserve their former national identity or widen the hyphen that already exists?

Political boundaries are an important consideration here, despite their colonial origins. Perhaps not every emigrant ensemble defines itself by the state boundaries from which it originated, which may add another layer of identity or lack thereof. The Druze, for instance, are an ethno-religious community that inhabit Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Most diasporic Druze (the largest population being in Venezuela, followed by the United States) identify as Druze-Venezuelans or Druze-Americans before they related to a specific Middle Eastern state (Radwan 2009; Swayd 2006). Lebanon, for example, is a multi-faith country, with current representative populations of Christians, Muslims and Druze. Large numbers of both Christian and Muslim Lebanese emigres live outside MENA, yet as regards their social identity, both tend to identify first as being of Lebanese descent. In their case, the state borders matter more than for the Druze, whose identity is more transnational, religious and cultural rather than bounded by the frontiers of their country of origin. How do different groups that originated from a single country reconcile their identity 'crisis' and how might this affect their return travel patterns? Do different types of diasporas (e.g. victim, labour, imperial) kindle different connections to the motherland? Countless questions such as these could be fruitfully addressed, and many more raised, through additional research.

Environmental issues

The ecological problems facing MENA are manifold and troublesome. The Arabian Peninsula's continued economic overdependence on fossil fuels has salient implications not only for those countries but also for the rest of the world. While oil and natural gas are finite resources, they are often treated as infinite reserves with little forethought for the future. A few countries are beginning to consider tourism as a potential alternative to their rentier economies, but they have yet to decelerate petroleum exploring and tapping on a perceptible scale. Clearly, a region with such an abundance of alternative natural energy sources (e.g. wind and sunshine) and technological expertise could bring its best minds together to devise solutions to global climate change and escalating aridity.

Desertification continues throughout the region but especially in North Africa and the Sahel. Here the Sahara continues to spread southward into the Sahel, brought about by natural

processes but quickened in part through overgrazing and global warming. Similar patterns have occurred on the Arabian Peninsula, but the Sahel's desertification is expanding faster than in any other desert on earth. This has clear implications for continued poverty, famine and the destruction of cultures and environments. Increased aridity throughout MENA means that countries are having to find alternative water sources (e.g. desalination and imports) and import a higher quantity of their food. This has clear economic implications, just as it does for biosecurity and food security, which may or may not be directly connected to political stability and turmoil (Hall, Timothy, & Duval 2003; Timothy 2006). It also has obvious implications for heavy energy-, construction- and food-dependent tourism (Lew, Hall, & Timothy 2015), but there is much work to be done to examine these phenomena in this regional setting.

MENA's natural environment—its topography, natural landscapes and biotic systems—while vast and ancient, are fragile and irreplaceable. While nature-based tourism was not the core of any chapter in this book, it was implied in several. This form of tourism is growing in popularity in the region and logically concentrates on desert landscapes and mountain ecosystems. Four-wheel drive activities and camel caravans are amongst the most popular activities in the Arabian Desert and the Sahara. While deserts are more resilient to human recreation than some other ecosystems (e.g. arctic tundra and rainforests), they can nonetheless be over-utilised, contributing to desertification processes. Likewise, desertification can influence tourism and how it is planned, carried out and managed, especially in the long term. While 'ecotourism' is often perceived to be an activity exclusively for tropical biomes, it actually has little to do with where it happens but rather how it happens. In addition to providing low-impact and small-scale activities in natural areas, its goals are to help protect the natural environment and contribute to the well-being of residents. It also tends to have an educative element and is pro-conservation. This raises many questions for the deserts of MENA, especially as regards indigenous people who roam the deserts, the use of oases as water sources, and the potential environmental impacts of off-road vehicles. How sustainable are these activities and how well do they benefit the communities where they occur? In the absence of nearby settlements, what communities are involved and which are best empowered by these 'responsible' forms of tourism? The physical and cultural environments of MENA are unique enough to merit extensive additional research about ecotourism and other manifestations of 'responsible' tourism.

Geopolitics

Political discord and religious contention underpin many tourism relationships in MENA. The constant state of war and malcontent keeps tourism from developing in ways that it has in other regions of the world. Tourism is extremely sensitive to geopolitics, terrorism and war and reacts quickly and durably. State travel warnings have played a major part in spreading the word of caution about travel to many Middle Eastern countries. These warnings provide useful travel information regarding security situations, but they may also be used as a political pawn to threaten insecure states into complying with the wishes of more powerful players. Many countries in the Middle East and North Africa are on the travel warning lists of Western countries and have been for years, even though there are safe places to visit. There are safe places for tourists in Iraq and Syria, for example, yet government travel warnings in major source markets continue to dissuade people from visiting out of an abundance of caution. While many MENA states have made valiant efforts to manage crises and recovery marketing during difficult times, the majority of countries have not realised their full tourism potential.

Since 2017, there has been a constant salvo of political events that have a bearing on the region's security and tourism. The Trump administration's December 2017 recognition of all of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and the 14 May 2018 relocation of the US embassy to the contested city, incited violence in Jerusalem and other occupied parts of Palestine, resulting in extended firefights along the Israel–Gaza border. A handful of other countries followed suit and moved their embassies at the same time. The United States' pulling out of the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2018 erected additional obstacles to Middle East peace.

The steady stream of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Libya and Tunisia into Europe has caused major security and political problems in the European Union and led, in part at least, to the enfranchisement of several conservative governments that hope to curtail cross-Mediterranean migration. The economic and political blockade of Qatar in 2017–2018 by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt also has implications for tourism, not least of which were required air route changes into and out of Qatar and stalled intra-regional tourism. Turkey's ongoing quarrels with the EU and the United States are proving problematic. The Kurdish vote for independence from Iraq may have long-term implications we do not yet know about. The division of Libya between belligerent leaders and ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen continue to destabilise the region in every way, not just for tourism.

Volumes could be written about social, cultural, political, economic and ecological conditions in the Middle East and North Africa, and how these influence tourism or are influenced by tourism. This book is a step in the right direction and has provided a great deal of insight into these and other issues. However, there is much more work to be done to understand the dynamics of this unique realm and how they contrast with other parts of the world. Tourism will continue to rise and fall with every change and whisper of discontent, yet MENA will continue to wield a sense of awe, mystique and curiosity for generations to come.

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