



The Middle East: Measuring the Relationship between Conflicts and Tourism

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 23rd January 2016, revised 28th February 2016, accepted 10th March 2016

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the relation between tourism, religion and armed conflicts in one of the most volatile regions of the world: the Middle East. On one hand, the religious heritage of three of the world's main religions in regions is one of the region's primary tourist assets. On another hand, it is precisely this diverse religious heritage that has caused most of the region's armed conflicts along the course of its long history, including most of the ones that continue to shape the region today. In the first part of this paper we will determine the accessibility or inaccessibility of the most prominent holy cities of the Biblical Holy Land, which is mostly located in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, as well as the factors that determine it. This area has the highest concentration of religious objectives. In the second part we will examine the influence the conflicts of the beginning of the 21st century, both religious and non-religious, have had on the tourist industries of countries across the region.

Keywords: The Middle East, The Holy Land, Religion, Tourism, Conflicts, Accessibility.

Introduction

Religion is one of the most ancient purposes for which people chose to travel outside their location of residence. The reasons of travelers who had a primarily religious motivation included worshipping the deities they believed in, visiting the sites of significant events in their religious scriptures, parables or legends, offering prayers or performing religious rituals in places of sacred significance. Not only has religion been a major motivation for travelling in humanity's history, but it still is. Even now millions of people travel every year to places they consider holy. Such examples may include the Vatican or Santiago de Compostela, Spain for Roman Catholics, Mount Athos in Greece for Greek Orthodox Christians, the Western Wall in Jerusalem for Jews, Varanasi, India for Hindus, Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia for Muslims, Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar for Sikhs and even Stonehenge, England for Neo-Pagans. The list could go on. These are all places where major events that shaped the religions mentioned took place along history or places where miracles attributed to divine forces or divine intervention took place. With the passing of time and the multiplication of the followers of those religions, the religious, economic and political significance of these places has steadily grown.

Religion has indeed been one of the strongest motivations for travelling since the beginning of recorded history, but it has also been one of the greatest motivations of armed conflicts. Two representative early examples of religious conflicts are the Islamic Conquest of North Africa, Persia and Spain and the Spanish Reconquista, the Spaniard response to the Muslim

conquest. Post Middle Ages examples of conflicts that had a primary religious component include the Thirty Years' War and the French Religious Wars, both of which were caused by differences among Roman Catholics and Protestants of the Holy Roman Empire and France respectively. Even many conflicts of the 20th century had significant religious components. Such examples include the Sudan Civil War (between the Christians and Animists of the south and the Muslims of the north), the Indo-Pakistani Conflicts (between Hindus and Muslims) and the Lebanese Civil War (fought by factions belonging to Sunni and Shi'a Islam and various Christian denominations). Religious differences have also led to persecutions, some of the best examples in history being the Roman Emperor's Nero persecution of early Christians and the Spanish Inquisition.

The region most representative for the effects of religious disputes is the Middle East. This part of the world was the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is from this region that these three religions which are now practiced all over the world find their origin. The desire of so many empires and leaders to conquer this region came exactly from the fact that it was home to major religious sites. And as at that time religion held even more importance than it does today in the lives of people, the conflicts that followed were only natural. The events that triggered the line of religious conflicts in the Middle East were the Crusades of the Middle Ages, when the Christian armies of Western Europe tried to reconquer the Holy Land, than under Arab Muslim domination. Even the conflicts that shape the region today have a religious basis. The longest running war of the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which officially started in 1948 is essentially a war between

Jews and Arabs (mostly followers of the Islamic faith, but also some Christians) over a piece of land which both sides claim as their own, often under historical and religious motivations.

In this paper we will analyze the implications and the effects that the modern conflicts in the Middle East have had on the tourist industries of the countries in the region. As we will see, even though religious tourism based on the heritage of more than one religion is one of the main attractions of the region, the conflicts between these communities have led to various restrictions and security issues which threaten to ruin this great potential.

Security issues and their relation to Tourism in the Modern age

The modern expansion of modern tourism as we know it largely took place following World War II, the biggest armed conflict in mankind's history. The decades that followed the war have seen a growth in the number of international tourists never encountered before that point and also a significant expansion of tourist active areas and a previously unheard of emergence of new tourist destinations¹. International tourism has indeed grown significantly. In 1950 only 25 million international tourists were recorded. In many cases, this figure is now equivalent to the number of international tourist arrivals recorded in one single country, for example Turkey, Russia or Great Britain. In 1994 approximately 515 million international tourist arrivals were recorded worldwide and in 2012 this figure has surpassed the one billion threshold².

The world's first major tourist areas were Western Europe (particularly France, The UK, Spain and Italy) and North America (particularly the USA). A main factor in the development of international tourism was the emerging of new tourist areas. Some good examples include Eastern Europe, East Asia, South America, Africa and the Middle East³. The main factors in this expansion of destinations were the curiosity of the ever more numerous tourists, who were eager to explore new cultures and landscapes, the realization that this sector of the economy can bring an important contribution to the economy of developing countries and the advancements made in facilitating travelling from one region of the globe to another⁴.

Although Western Europe and the US continue to be the most popular destinations worldwide, other markets are starting to emerge. After the fall of communism, a number of up until then anonymous destinations have made their way in the top 10 tourist receiving countries: China, Russia and Turkey. Russia's sudden emergence is mainly due to the fact that the USSR broke into 15 new countries in 1991 and a significant part of international tourist arrivals in Russia, do in fact come from these newly founded states⁵. But the ascension of the other two examples genuinely comes from visible improvements in infrastructure and tourism-related facilities.

Many of these emerging destinations have several problems to resolve before they can reach the status of the leading tourist industries. One of these many problems, prevalent in many parts of the world, is the prevalence of armed conflicts and longtime ethnical and political disputes. One the most representative examples of this is the area known as the *Middle East*. There are two ways one can define the Middle East. The traditional definition limits the region delimited by the Armenia Plateau to the north, The Arabian Peninsula to the south, The Nile Valley to the west and The Zagros Mountains to the east⁶. There is also a more recent definition of a *Greater Middle East*, which was first advanced by the representatives of the USA at the 35th G8 Summit in 2009. According to this definition, the Middle East is the region stretching from the Himalayan Plateau to the West African Coast from east to west and from the Armenian Plateau to the Horn of Africa from north to south⁷.

The Middle East receives a lot of attention because this is one of the most "conflict rich" regions. The origin of most of these conflicts resides in the legacy left by the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century and in the British and French colonization and decolonization of the area which took place between 1918 and the early 50's⁸. The longest conflict of the area is the one between Israel and Palestine, which broke out after Israel declared its independence in 1948. Ever since then, it has been, technically at least, the only state in the world that has not had even a brief period of complete peace since establishment. The long length of this conflict is not the only unusual thing. This prolonged war is the one that has brought to the attention of the world terms like "terrorism" and "asymmetric warfare". An asymmetric war is a military conflict in which the armed forces, strategies and opponents' tactics differ greatly⁹. A significant phenomenon derived from this concept is terrorism itself.

Today, a common misconception regarding terrorism is that it is a phenomenon that appeared only in the early days of the 21st century. This belief is fueled by the attacks that took place in New York City on the 11th of September 2001. One of the earliest terrorist organizations recorded was the Shi'a Muslim sect of the *Hashshashin*, who made their presence felt in the Middle East from the 11th to the 13th century, when they were suppressed by the Mongol invasion. Another example is the 19th century *Narodnaya Volya* (*Народная Воля*), in Russia, who succeeded in assassinating numerous prolific public figures of the era, including tsar Alexander II¹⁰.

There are several ways terrorist organizations can be classified. The most common classification is state and non-state terrorism. State terrorism is the type of terrorism directly sponsored by a sovereign state. Recent examples of state sponsored terrorism can be found in Pakistan, which allegedly formerly supported terrorist acts against the Indian presence in Kashmir and Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, which is known to have financially sustained terrorism in Africa, Asia and Europe and also Cuba¹¹. Non-state terrorism is the type of terrorism that finances its activities from

other sources and usually directs its activities against state authorities. It is also useful to classify terrorist groups according to their objective. These objectives can be ethnic or nationalist (ex.: ETA in Spain's Basque Country, IRA in the UK's Northern Ireland, The Tamil Tigers in North Sri Lanka), religious (ex.: Al-Qaeda, Hamas) or ideological (ex.: FARC in Colombia, Sendero Luminoso in Peru). The list can continue, but these are the most prevalent types of terrorism. In some cases, terrorist organizations may have ideologies that combine religious and political elements, a good example being Hezbollah, which mainly operates in Lebanon.

Terrorism has been the single biggest factor that has influenced travel after the beginning of the 21st century. It has brought significant changes in travelling security protocols all over the world, particularly in air transport. These changes included the strengthening of procedures at checkpoints in airports or the addition of sky marshals on more commercial flights. But, again, these notions are not new. The first commercial airline to have come up with air marshals was El Al, the Israeli flag carrier¹². This followed the hijacking of the Tel Aviv-Rome El Al Flight 426 in 1968. This was one of the first signs that terrorism and armed conflicts started moving from a relatively well defined battlefield to civilians' daily lives. Since the 60's the frequency of terrorist attacks in Israel has increased significantly, even since the 1993 Oslo Accords¹³. Israel was the first Middle Eastern nation to experience large scale terrorism, but today it is not the only one. Iraq has seen a surge of terrorism since the American Invasion of 2003¹⁴. and not even Saudi Arabia, the country which can be considered one of the focus points of the 9/11 events is not entirely immune to modern terrorism. Proof of this stand several attacks that took place after 2001, which were mainly directed at foreign nationals residing on Saudi soil or on prominent Saudis which were considered not to follow the Wahhabi Islamic doctrine strictly enough¹⁵.

This increase has led to restrictions ranging from more thorough security checks to entirely banning certain categories of people from entering the country or severely restricting their access. One of the ways a state can restrict the access of another state's citizens on its soil is by cutting diplomatic relations or annulling recognition. Such an act may contribute to movement restrictions because, among others, it causes difficulties in obtaining visas and/or other permits or even makes obtaining them impossible¹⁶. In the case of full-scale wars, depending on the intensity of the conflict and the damage it has caused to a nation's services and infrastructure, travel and tourism can come to a brutal halt and remain this way for several years, until safety and security conditions make reconstruction possible.

Religion—both a gift and a curse for tourism in Israel

Religion has always been the main element that has brought tourists to the Middle East, particularly in the region generically known as the *Holy Land*. This Holy Land, which today covers

most of Israel and Palestine and parts of Jordan, is the birthplace of the world's three main Abrahamic religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Today it is estimated that these three religions are practiced by just over half of the world's population¹⁷. Over the last five millennia this area has been under the rule of: Canaanites, Ancient Egyptians, Samaritans, Ancient Hebrews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Ancient Macedonians, Hasmoneans, Ancient Romans, Byzantines, various Arab Caliphates, European Crusaders, Ottomans, British, Jordanians and Israelis. The main reason that has led to disputes over this land was religion, or to be more exact, the desire of great empires to control this place of great religious significance and also the often difficult cohabitation of the various ethnic and religious local communities.

The spiritual center of the Holy Land is undoubtedly the city of Jerusalem. This place is holy not just to one religion, but to three. In this city major events that shaped the three main Abrahamic religions took place along the centuries and today there are several vestiges which stand as testimony for these.

There are several sites which make Jerusalem a holy city to Christians. One of these is The Cenacle, which is said to be the site of The Last Supper. The Mount of Olives is the place where Jesus Christ was arrested before standing trial and being crucified. Another site related to this event is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which marks the site of Jesus Christ's crucifixion on Mount Golgotha. Two smaller sites are situated at the base of the Mount of Olives: a small Benedictine church, that is one of the sites which is said to house the tomb of the Virgin Mary and Adam's Chapel, which is one of the sites said to house the remains of Adam, traditionally considered by all the three religions afore mentioned to be the first man God created¹⁸. Not far from these sites, lies the Church of Saint John the Baptist, built in the 5th century AD, one of the oldest Christian places of worship in the world. The most famous of Jerusalem's Christian holy sites is the Via Dolorosa, which means *The Road of Sorrow* in Latin, with its nine Stations: a road that follows the route Jesus Christ took while carrying his own cross on the way to his crucifixion and the Church of Saint John the Baptist, one of the oldest Christian places of worship in the world. Finally, near Jerusalem, in the village of Al-Tur, there is a small holy site called the *Chapel of Ascension*, which is believed to mark the site where the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven took place, 40 days after His resurrection. Although this venue bears the name "chapel", symbolizing a Christian type of place of worship, today it is in fact a functioning mosque that serves the local Muslim community¹⁹. Christian pilgrims are however welcome to the site, which makes it an example of good relations between two different faiths.

Jews consider Jerusalem holy because this city was the first capital of the kingdom that was founded by their ancient ancestors after the exodus from Egypt. In Antiquity the city was home to the two great Israelite temples. The First Temple of King Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonian invaders led by

Nebuchadnezzar II in 587 BC. The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans after the Jewish Uprising of 70 AD, an event which was shortly followed by the exile of Jews from the Holy Land. There is however one part of the temple that avoided destruction: the Western Wall, also known as the *Wailing Wall*. The second name originates in the fact that over the last two thousand years religious Jews made the journey to these ruins to commemorate the loss of their last Great Temple and the extinction of their kingdom²⁰. Another holy Jewish site is Mount Zion, the last outpost of the same failed uprising against the Romans. This mountain inspired the name of the controversial political ideology known as Zionism²¹. Another site of great importance to Jews which is located close to Mount Zion is David's Tomb. One final significant Jewish site in Jerusalem is the Hurva Synagogue, which was first constructed in the 18th century, at the time when Jews started to resettle in Jerusalem. It was destroyed by Muslim Arabs shortly after its inauguration and it is this when the site got its name: *Hurva* is the Hebrew word for "ruin"²². It was however subsequently rebuilt. West Jerusalem is the site of the Mea Shearim neighborhood, a mainly Haredi area founded in the 1870's by European Jews who undertook *aliyah*, the modern immigration of the Jewish Diaspora to the land of Israel.

The most interesting holy site of Jerusalem is definitely Temple Mount, which is dominated today by a mosque with a gold plated dome, known in the English-speaking world as the *Dome of the Rock*. The name of this site is given by the fact that this shrine does in fact contain a fenced rock in its interior, which bears significant importance to believers of all the three main Abrahamic religions. This rock is said to be the place where Abraham was about to sacrifice his own son before God stopped him from doing so. This event is mentioned in the holy writings of all three religions, which makes the site significant to all of them. To Muslims on the other hand, this place bears an even greater significance as it is one of the places believed to be the place where the Prophet Mohammed rose to heaven. It is because of this that the Arabic name of the mosque is *Al-Haram al-Sharif*, which means *The Noble Sanctuary* in Arabic. Other sources place this event on a spot marked by the nearby Al-Aqsa Mosque, located across the dome. Al-Aqsa, having been established in 705 AD is also the tenth oldest such site in the world²³. Another important Muslim holy site is Omar's Mosque, built in the 12th century in the vicinity of the Mount of Olives to mark the place through which the Arab conquerors entered Jerusalem and to commemorate the first prayer of Caliph Omar al-Khattab after conquering Jerusalem. Other significant Muslim venues in Jerusalem are the Muslim schools or *madrasas*. Four of the oldest madrasas are located on Bab el-Hadib Street. They are *Al-Jawhariya*, *Al-Arghuniya*, *Al-Khatuniya* and *Al-Mazruhiya*. Muslim influences can also be seen in the numerous souks which are located in the old town. The biggest and most famous ones are *Khan al-Zeit* and *Al-Qattarin*.

Throughout the 20th century, depending on the religious community which ruled the Old Town of Jerusalem, the access of

certain other communities was often restricted or hindered. For instance, in the first part of the century, the British apart from restricting Jewish immigration to the Mandate of Palestine, also restricted Jewish access to the Old Town with the purpose of not stirring bad feelings amongst the Muslim Arab community, which at that time dominated Jerusalem²⁴. During the Jordanian occupation of East Jerusalem (1948-1967), which followed the Israeli Independence War and was ended by the Six-Day War, Israeli citizens were completely banned from entering that section of the city and the access of Christian pilgrims was seriously hindered and heavily supervised²⁵.

Today, at a quick glance, one might assume that there are no major restrictions. But despite appearances, this is not true. Jews and Christians do have access all across the city, but despite the fact that Jerusalem is the third most holy site in Islam, most of the world's Muslims are unable to step foot in Israel because this country has no diplomatic relations with most Muslim countries. The most notable exceptions are Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Azerbaijan and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. A detailed analysis of the situation can be seen in table 1. Relations are often so tense that the travel documents issued by some of these countries, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran bare the mention "this passport is valid for all the countries of the world except Israel"²⁶.

Table-1 includes data for all of the world's Muslim majority countries and countries with significant Muslim populations. The last entry (no. 54) sums up the world Muslim population of the rest of the world's countries. In total, almost one quarter of the world's population is Muslim. Furthermore, today Islam is the fastest growing major religion²⁷. But as it can clearly be seen from the table, more than 60% of the world's Muslim population lives in countries that have no diplomatic ties with Israel. This makes travelling between Israel and these countries very difficult or impossible, which brings us to the initial idea. This table demonstrates that even today travel restrictions to Jerusalem are quite visible. A consistent majority of the world's Muslim population is unable to reach the third holiest site of their religion because of diplomatic and political issues.

Another place of great religious significance in the Holy Land is Bethlehem. This town, located just 20 km south of Jerusalem is best known to Christians all over the world as the place of birth of Jesus Christ. The exact place of His birth is signaled by the Church of the Nativity. The building in its current form is more than fourteen centuries old. This church does not belong to a particular Christian denomination, but it is shared between Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic monks and priests. This centuries old arrangement came to be known simply as the *status quo*. Although many people tend to think of Bethlehem as an Israeli city, Bethlehem has actually always been under Palestinian control and has always been populated by Arabs; in the past most of them were Christians, but today there is a Muslim majority residing in this town.

Table-1
Summary of the world’s Muslim majority countries’ diplomatic relations status with Israel

No.	Country	Total Population	Muslims		Christians		Diplomatic recognition of Israel
			%	Population	%	Population	
1	Afghanistan	31,108,077	99	30,796,996	0	0	no
2	Albania	3,011,455	70	2,108,019	30	903,437	yes
3	Algeria	38,087,812	99	37,706,934	1	380,878	no
4	Azerbaijan	9,590,159	93.4	8,957,209	5.5	527,459	yes
5	Bahrain	1,281,332	81.2	1,040,442	9	115,320	no
6	Bangladesh	163,654,860	89.5	146,471,100	1	1,636,549	no
7	Bosnia-Herzegovina	3,875,653	49	1,899,070	49	1,899,070	yes
8	Brunei	415,717	67	278,530	10	41,572	no
9	Burkina Faso	17,812,916	60.5	10,776,814	24.2	4,310,726	yes
10	Chad	11,193,452	55.1	6,167,592	34.3	3,839,354	no
11	Comoros	752,228	98	737,183	2	15,045	no
12	Djibouti	792,198	94	744,666	6	47,532	no
13	Egypt ¹	85,294,388	89	75,912,005	11	9,382,383	yes
14	Gambia	1,833,051	90	1,649,746	8	146,644	yes
15	Guinea	11,176,026	85	9,499,622	8	849,082	no
16	Guinea-Bissau	1,660,870	50	830,435	10	166,087	yes
17	India ²	1,220,800,359	13.4	163,587,248	2.3	28,078,408	yes
18	Indonesia	251,160,124	86.1	216,248,867	9	22,604,411	no
19	Iran	79,853,900	98	78,256,822	0.3	239,562	no
20	Iraq	31,858,481	96	30,584,142	2.8	892,037	no
21	Israel	7,707,042	16.9	1,302,490	2.1	161,848	Israel
22	Jordan	6,482,081	93	6,028,335	6	388,925	yes
23	Kazakhstan	17,736,086	70.2	12,450,732	26.2	4,646,855	yes
24	Kosovo	2,695,316	92	2,479,691	8	215,625	no ³
25	Kuwait	1,847,708	85	1,570,552	6	110,862	no
26	Kyrgyzstan	5,548,082	75	4,161,062	21	1,165,097	yes
27	Lebanon	4,131,583	54	2,231,055	39	1,611,317	no
28	Libya	6,002,347	97	5,822,277	2	120,047	no
29	Malaysia	29,628,392	60.4	17,895,549	9.1	2,696,184	no
30	Maldives	393,988	99	390,048	0	0	no

No.	Country	Total Population	Muslims		Christians		Diplomatic recognition of Israel
			%	Population	%	Population	
31	Mali	15,698,882	94.8	14,882,540	2.4	376,673	no
32	Mauritania	3,437,610	99	3,403,234	0	0	no
33	Morocco	32,649,130	99	32,322,639	0.9	293,842	no
34	Niger	16,899,327	90	15,209,394	4	675,973	no
35	Nigeria	174,507,539	48.8	85,159,679	50.8	88,649,830	yes
36	Oman	3,154,134	85	2,681,014	6	189,248	no
37	Pakistan	193,238,868	96.4	186,282,269	1.6	3,091,822	no
38	Palestine (West Bank and Gaza)	4,440,077	84.5	3,751,865	5.2	230,884	Israeli occupation
39	Qatar	2,042,444	77.5	1,582,894	8.5	173,608	no
40	Saudi Arabia	26,939,583	90	24,245,625	5	1,346,949	no
41	Senegal	13,300,410	94	12,502,385	5	665,021	yes
42	Sierra Leone	5,612,685	60	3,367,611	10	561,269	yes
43	Somalia	10,251,568	99	10,149,052	0	0	no
44	Sudan	34,847,910	98	34,150,952	2	696,058	no
45	Syria	22,457,336	86	19,313,309	14	3,144,027	no
46	Tajikistan	7,910,041	90	7,119,037	10	791,004	yes
47	Tunisia	10,835,873	98	10,619,156	1	108,359	no
48	Turkey ¹	80,694,485	99	79,887,540	0.2	161,389	yes
49	Turkmenistan	5,113,040	89	4,550,606	11	562,434	yes
50	UAE	5,473,972	76	4,160,219	9	492,657	no
51	Uzbekistan	28,661,637	88	25,222,241	12	3,439,396	yes
52	Western Sahara	538,811	99	533,423	0	0	no – Moroccan occupation
53	Yemen	25,408,288	99	25,154,205	0	0	no
54	OTHER COUNTRIES	N/A	N/A	128,616,449	N/A	2,176,204,496	yes
Total Muslim and Christian populations				1,613,452,568		2,369,093,284	YES + Israel: 20
Total Muslim population of countries that do NOT have diplomatic ties with Israel			Pop.	973,078,568		45,084,248 ⁴	NO + Occupation: 34
			%	60.31		1.90	

¹Total population includes nationals living abroad. ²Although India is not a Muslim majority country, it was included in this list because it houses the world’s third largest Muslim population. ³The reason for Kosovo’s lack of diplomatic recognition of Israel has no ideological or religious background, but rather the fact that Israel still considers Kosovo a Serbian province, as do many other UN member states. ⁴This total does NOT include the Christian populations of Kuwait, Bahrain Qatar, the UAE, Oman and Saudi Arabia, as they are made up predominantly of foreign nationals who hold passports issued by countries that have diplomatic ties with Israel.

Source: Bard, M. G. (2012), Neuberger, B. (2009) and The World Factbook 2012-2013 (2013).

Until 2002, the access of tourists and pilgrims to Bethlehem was relatively easy. But in April-May that year The Church of the Nativity was the scene of one of the most prominent episodes of the Second Intifada. After being chased by Israeli security forces, a group of Muslim Palestinian fighters took refuge inside the church. This crisis came close to destroying the monument, but in the end, after long negotiations, the Palestinians surrendered and no harm came to the basilica²⁸. This episode was a good example of how vulnerable religious relics and tourism are to ongoing conflicts. But the consequences of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Bethlehem were not restricted to endangering the town's heritage. Right after this event, Israel began the construction of a wall that had the purpose of separating Israeli controlled territories from the Palestinian ones. A 10m high section of this barrier currently completely surrounds Bethlehem. This wall has severely hindered the access of tourists and pilgrims to the sacred sites and almost ruined Bethlehem's once flourishing tourist industry²⁹. The construction of this wall has also had an effect on the religious structure of Bethlehem. The Christian exodus and the arrival of refugees from other parts of the West Bank has turned Bethlehem, one of Christianity's most important sites into a predominantly Muslim town. If in 1948 Christians represented over 85% of the population, today their percentage has dropped to approximately 35% and the shift is steadily continuing. Another minor Christian holy site in Bethlehem is the Church of St. Catherine.

Bethlehem is not only a holy city to Christians, but also to Jews. First of all, Bethlehem is the birthplace of King David, the second king of the Kingdom of Israel and one of the most prominent figures of the Old Testament. Today there is only one monument to remind visitors of this part of the city's history: King David's Wells. These wells are considered to be the site where King David's soldiers broke the Philistine defense lines in order to bring him water to drink. When they returned to a cave where the king and his supporters were hiding, David refused to drink the water which his soldiers had risked their own lives to get and instead poured it out before God. A second site of religious significance to Jews is Rachel's Tomb. This tomb houses the remains of the matriarch Rachel, who is described by ancient texts as the favorite wife of Jacob, who later took the name *Israel* and is revered today as the founding father of the Jewish people³⁰. But even though this place is recognized as a holy site by Islam too and even though the small building that houses the tomb dates from the Ottoman period has a room for Muslim prayers, today the access of regular tourists and pilgrims is greatly hindered by the security measures imposed by the Israeli occupation. There is only one bus that does just four runs a day which connects the tomb to the center of Bethlehem. But this is no regular means of transportation: it is an armored bus designed to pass through several security check points and only Jews are allowed to travel to the tomb. Since the start of the Second Intifada and the construction of the separation wall, people of other confessions (Muslims and Christians) have been forbidden from visiting the

tomb. The opposite happened during the Jordanian occupation, when Israelis were completely banned from entering the Jordanian occupation area.

Jerusalem and Bethlehem are not the only places of religious importance in the Holy Land that are affected by the geopolitical situation. The city of Nablus is even more affected by the conflict than the cities previously described. The main religious site in Nablus is Jacob's Well. This well is associated with the site where Jacob camped during his travel from Shechem to Paddan Aram. According to the Christian New Testament the same well is the place where Jesus Christ stopped to rest during one of his travels and encountered a Samaritan woman. This makes the site holy for both Jews and Christians. Another holy site in Nablus, important primarily to Jews, is a funerary monument traditionally identified as the Tomb of Joseph, Jacob and Rachel's first born son³¹. However, it should be noted that the frequent clashes between Palestinian militants and Israeli occupation forces make travel to Nablus highly dangerous and foreign visits to the city are only sporadic. The situation of Hebron is similar. Home to the Patriarchs' Cave, this city is divided in two sections: H1 (under Palestinian control) and H2 (under Israeli control). This Patriarchs' Cave is said to be the eternal resting place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people, except Rachel, whose tomb is in Bethlehem³². Today the cave is situated beneath a Saladin era mosque and as these characters are mentioned by the Quran too, the place is holy to Muslims too. Once again, because of the tensions between Palestinians and Israeli settlers and because of the Israeli military occupation forces and their checkpoints, access to Hebron is very difficult.

The holy city with the fewest security risks in the Palestinian Territories is Jericho. Consequently, the access to tourists and pilgrims is much freer than in the case of other towns in the occupied territories. Apart from the fact that it is believed to be the oldest urban settlement in the world³³, Jericho and its surroundings are also home to several vestiges from biblical times. The town itself does not house many objectives of religious nature. The main attractions within the town limits are the walls and the ancient ruins, which are more than 4600 years old. The main religious attraction near Jericho is Christian: the Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Temptation. Located on Jebel Quruntul, a few kilometers north of Jericho, it is traditionally considered to mark the place where Jesus fasted for forty days, while being tempted by the devil to give up this attempt. Eventually, the cave where this deed took place was turned into a church, than monastery in the 6th century AD. Another religious vestige in the area is located on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Samaritan's Inn is considered to mark the place where the Parable of the Good Samaritan was set. The only notable biblical symbol within the city limits is The Tree of Zacchaeus. This two millennia old sycamore tree is the point where the tale of Jesus and Zacchaeus the tax gatherer took place. In spite of the more relaxed security situation, access Jericho is not unrestricted. The town has a law that bans Israeli

citizens from entering the city. In and around Jericho there are vestiges of three synagogues. But for the purpose of protecting the vestiges from politically motivated vandalism, these are closed off from the public most of the time.

Despite the numerous examples of inconveniences caused by deeply rooted religious quarrels, there are also examples of holy cities that do not have any major safety and security issues. These are all located inside the internationally recognized borders of Israel. The first such example is Nazareth. This city located in northern Israel not far from the northern section of the West Bank separation barrier is known today primarily as the place where Jesus Christ spent his childhood. Today many of the historically significant places from that period are marked by churches. The two most known examples are the Church of Annunciation and the Church of Saint Gabriel, which are both considered by Catholic and Orthodox Christians respectively to be the places the Archangel Gabriel announced the upcoming birth of the Messiah to Virgin Mary³⁴. Furthermore, The Synagogue Church is a Melkite Greek Catholic church that marks the site where it is believed Jesus preached. Saint Joseph's Church marks the place considered to be the location of the Saint Joseph's workshop (Jesus' father). The Franciscan Mensa Christi Church is considered to mark the place where Jesus met the apostles after the Resurrection. The biggest mosque in Nazareth is the White Mosque, located in the vicinity of the town's main square. Mount Tabor, located not far from the city is believed to be the site of Jesus Christ's Transfiguration³⁵.

Today there are two cities which bear the name Nazareth (pop. 81,000). The old city of Nazareth is predominantly Arab: two thirds Muslims and one third Christians. The new city of Natzrat Illit, also known as *Upper Nazareth* (pop. 41,000), founded in 1957 is predominantly Jewish. These two administrative entities however are not separated by barbed wire or tall fences as in the case of The West Bank, but merely by a boulevard. At the foundation of Israel the Arab population of the area was predominantly Christian. But in the meantime, because of higher birth rates among Muslims, they eventually became a majority. But along the decades, regardless of the religious and ethnic structure of the area there have been no major armed conflicts. The main reason for this was that at the partition that followed the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, Nazareth fell into the Israeli controlled area and all the inhabitants were automatically given Israeli citizenship. This right of citizenship along with other incentives, such as the exemption of Israeli Arabs from the military service, has helped to keep the peace in that area. There are still several voices that affirm that there are notable gaps between the social situations of Israeli Arabs and Jews, but the general situation of Arab Israeli citizens is significantly better than that of Palestinians from all points of view³⁶.

There are two more locations in Israel which can be classified as religious destinations, both entirely peaceful. But the reason for

this peace is that they do not belong to none of the three Abrahamic religions discussed in the previous paragraphs, but to the Bahá'í Faith. This is a relatively new religious movement that started in 1844 after the Persian scholar Bahá'ú'lláh proclaimed his mission to spread the word of God, following His discontent with Islam and Christianity³⁷. As this religion includes several elements from Islam and Christianity, it too is considered an Abrahamic religion. Today it is estimated that the Bahá'í Faith has 6-7 million followers around the world³⁸. Most of this religion's holy sites are located in the Israeli cities of Haifa and Acre.

The most important of these sites is the Shrine of the Báb, which is home to the remains of the central figure of the Bahá'í Faith. His remains were moved here in 1909. The surroundings of this shrine were later arranged as gardens that respected the principles of the faith. Today the whole area is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Although the number of followers of the Bahá'í Faith is not very big, the gardens are visited annually by many thousands of tourists because of their architectural and esthetic value. The whole area is collectively known as the Bahá'í World Centre. Another important Bahá'í holy site is The Mansion of Bahjí, near the city of Acre, the place where the founder of the faith died in 1892. The Citadel of Acre is also considered sacred by the followers of the Bahá'í Faith because this is where Bahá'ú'lláh was imprisoned by the Ottoman authorities for 24 years.

Considering the fact that these two cities contain no Muslim holy sites, we can say that there are absolutely no travel restrictions for the potential pilgrims, not even the diplomatic restrictions which we have discussed in the case of Jerusalem. This is because very few Bahá'ís live in Muslim countries, as some of them do in fact persecute the followers of this faith, as is the case of Iran and Afghanistan³⁹. Tiberias is in a similar situation. This city is considered holy by Jews because it became the center of Jewish holy life in Palestine after the Revolts against the Romans of the first century AD⁴⁰. Virtually all the world's Jews can travel to Israel, even those living in Muslim countries, which do not have ties with Israel, as Israel makes exceptions for the Jewish ethnics of those countries.

A tourist destination with religious sites can be viewed from two standpoints: either as a destination for cultural tourism or a destination for religious tourism. Cultural tourism is defined as a form of tourism that focuses on discovering items such as the art of painting, sculpture, architecture and even music or dancing⁴¹. Religious tourism is practiced by those who visit religious sites with the purpose of venerating deities or performing religious rituals⁴², as opposed to those who visit these sites just to admire their architectural and artistic qualities.

Given these definitions, the radar graph in Figure-1 shows the degree of accessibility for these two categories of tourists. The red line represents the degree of accessibility of the whole world population to a location, based on the assumption that every

individual can practice cultural tourism in that location regardless of his/her religion provided there are no TOTAL restrictions. The blue line shows the degree of accessibility of the followers of the religion(s) of which that location houses holy sites.

Table-2
Accessibility of religious destinations in Israel, Mecca and Medina to believers and the entire world population

	Believers		All	
	Population	%	Population	%
Jerusalem	2,981,454,815	74.57	6.122.139.412	86.29
Bethlehem	2,341,080,814	98.17	6.122.139.412	86.29
Nablus	0	0.00	150.000	0.01
Hebron	300,000	0.02	300.000	0.01
Jericho	2,334,852,337	97.91	6.122.139.412	86.29
Nazareth	2,325,471,335	98.16	6.122.139.412	86.29
Haifa	6,385,696	100.00	6.122.139.412	86.29
Acre	6,385,696	100.00	6.122.139.412	86.29
Tiberias	15,609,480	100.00	6.122.139.412	86.29
Mecca	1,582,868,427	98.10	1.582.868.427	22.31
Medina	1,582,868,427	98.10	1.582.868.427	22.31

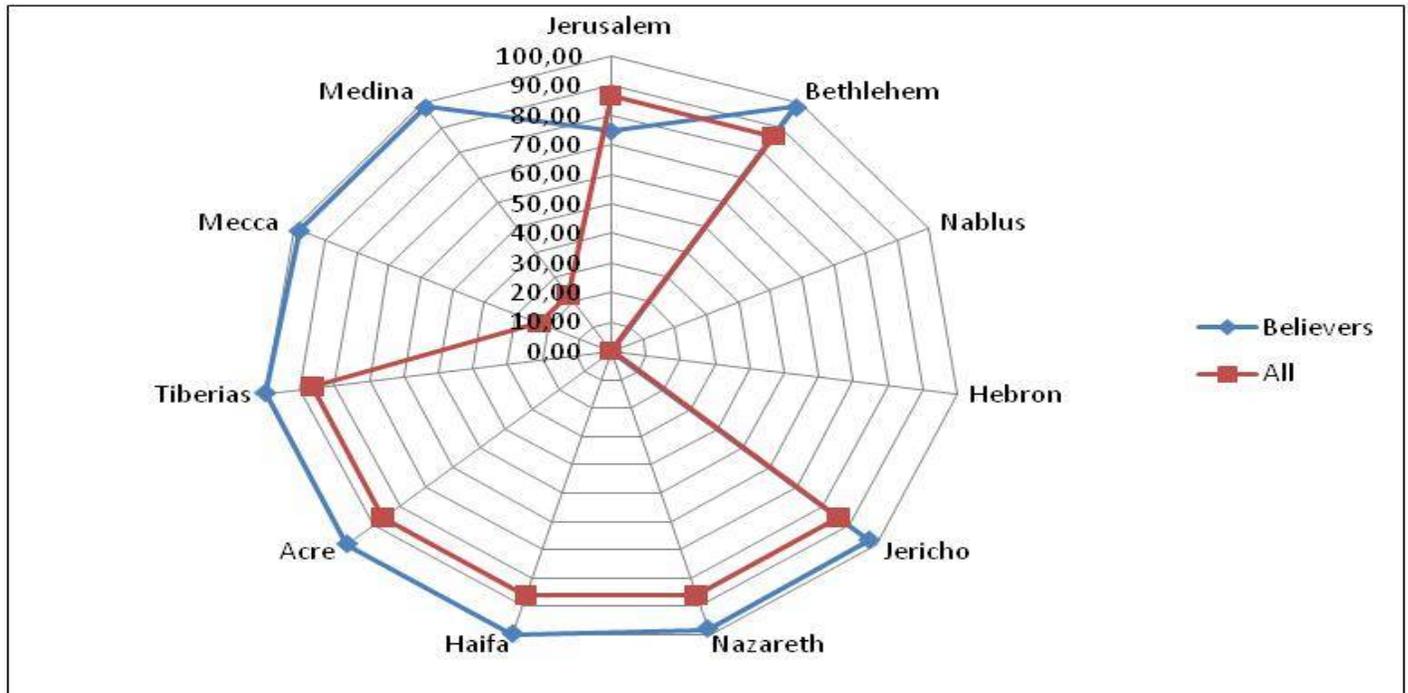
The locations marked in red have significant security restrictions.

Source: Own work, based on figures provided by The World Factbook 2012-2013 (2013).

Table-3
Religious significance of holy places in Israel, Mecca and Medina according to religion

Religion	Christianity	Islam	Judaism	Bahá'í Faith
Worldwide believers	2.369.093.284	1.613.452.569	15.609.480	6.385.696
Jerusalem	X	X	X	-
Bethlehem	X	-	X	-
Nablus	X	-	X	-
Hebron	-	X	X	-
Jericho	x	-	X	-
Nazareth	x	-	-	-
Haifa	-	-	-	X
Acre	-	-	-	X
Tiberias	-	-	X	-
Mecca	-	X	-	-
Medina	-	X	-	-

Source: Own work, based on the descriptions previously wrote in the paper.



Source: Own work, based on the numbers in Table-2.

Figure-1

Graphic representation of the accessibility of religious destinations in Israel, Mecca and Medina to believers and the whole world population. Graph shows percentage points

The results in Figure-1 can be summed up in a few main points, as follows:

Jerusalem: travelling to this city is restricted to people from countries which do not recognize Israel diplomatically. The population of these amounts to almost 14% of the entire world population. The total figure of the practitioners of the three Abrahamic religions which have sacred sites in this city is almost 4 billion. Because most Muslims live in countries in the category mentioned earlier, the percentage of believers which have access to these sites is just under 75%.

Bethlehem, Jericho and Nazareth: As far as the percentage of the world population which can access these cities goes, the same restrictions apply as in the case of Jerusalem. The 14% of the world population which lives in countries that do not recognize Israel can travel neither to Nazareth, which is an Israeli town, nor to the Palestinian towns of Bethlehem and Jericho, which can only be reached by crossing Israeli soil and checkpoints. It should also be pointed out that these checkpoints create hardships to all travelers regardless of faith or nationality. As for the believers who have access to these towns, the percentages are close to 100% percent because few Christians live in the countries which do not recognize Israel. The slightly lower figure of Jericho is due to the fact that Israeli citizens, who form almost half of the world's Jewish population, are not allowed to enter the city.

Haifa, Acre and Tiberias: The situation of these towns is similar to that of the three towns discussed at the previous point, with a small exception. All of the world's believers of the religions to which those towns are significant have access to them. Almost no Bahá'ís live in Muslim majority countries (see Haifa and Acre) and all of the world's Jews can enter Israel, including those who live in countries that have no diplomatic relations with Israel, who are exempted from the restrictions previously presented (see Tiberias).

Nablus and Hebron: These two cities are almost completely sealed from the exterior due to various tensions caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nablus, being an almost entirely Muslim populated city and a holy city for Christians and Jews is essentially cut off to all believers. Almost the same goes for Hebron, which is an almost entirely Muslim populated city which is holy to Islam and Judaism. But practically the only Muslims who have access to the holy sites within the city's limits are the locals. As for the Jews, they are entirely restricted.

Mecca and Medina: The two most religiously significant cities of Islam, located in Saudi Arabia are accessible to all of the world's Muslims, except the Muslim Arab citizens of Israel. But because of the fact that non-Muslims are forbidden from entering these cities, this means that less than a quarter of the total population of the world has access to these cities (see more detailed descriptions in the following section).

Considering the review of these facts and figures, we can conclude that travel restrictions to religious sites in the Holy Land are not a thing of the past. Even though the purpose of these restrictions has shifted from keeping the authority over land that has been occupied following a conflict from the 40's to the 60's to protecting from the rise of phenomena like terrorism and asymmetric warfare after 1967, the result has always been the same: travel restrictions to tourists, pilgrims and locals alike.

The influence of armed conflicts on tourism in the Middle East

In this part of the paper we will analyze the link between the recent conflicts of the Middle East and the numbers of foreign visitors the countries of the region have received. This is necessary because many people tend to apply the same label to the whole region of the Middle East, even though, as we are going to find out, much of area has been untouched by armed conflicts for a long time.

The period from 1994 to 2000 was characterized by a relative state of peace throughout the whole region. Therefore, most countries shown in figure 2 have experienced a steady growth of international tourist arrivals. The year 2000 was the moment when the security situation in the Middle East started to deteriorate again. The event that triggered a new wave of conflicts was the Second Intifada in The Palestinian Territories. This uprising of the Palestinians was triggered by the visit to Temple Mount in Jerusalem of Ariel Sharon, who at that time was the prime minister of Israel⁴³. This gesture, considered offensive by much of the Arab population, along with the longtime discontent of the Palestinians with the Israeli occupation of their lands quickly led to a full scale uprising. The most publicized episodes of the Second Intifada were the siege of The Church of the Nativity and the battles of the cities of Nablus and Jenin.

This large scale Palestinian-Israeli confrontation has had a notable effect on Israel's international tourist arrivals. If in 2000 Israel received 2.5 million tourists, in the years of the Intifada this number sharply dropped, reaching a low of 800,000 in 2002. It was only towards the end of this conflict that numbers started going up again.

The conclusion of the Second Intifada was the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from The Gaza Strip. This accord was shortly thereafter followed by renewed tensions when Hamas, who took control of the Gaza Strip after the withdrawal, started targeting Israeli towns around the strip, like Ashkelon, Sderot and Netivot with short range missiles. The number of international tourist arrivals returned to the pre-Intifada levels only in 2007 and 2008, only to slightly drop once again after the December 2008-January 2009 Gaza War. This war was caused by Israel intention to reduce the number of Hamas rockets fired from Gaza on southern Israel⁴⁴. This goal was achieved after the end of the short conflict, but the result was yet another blow to

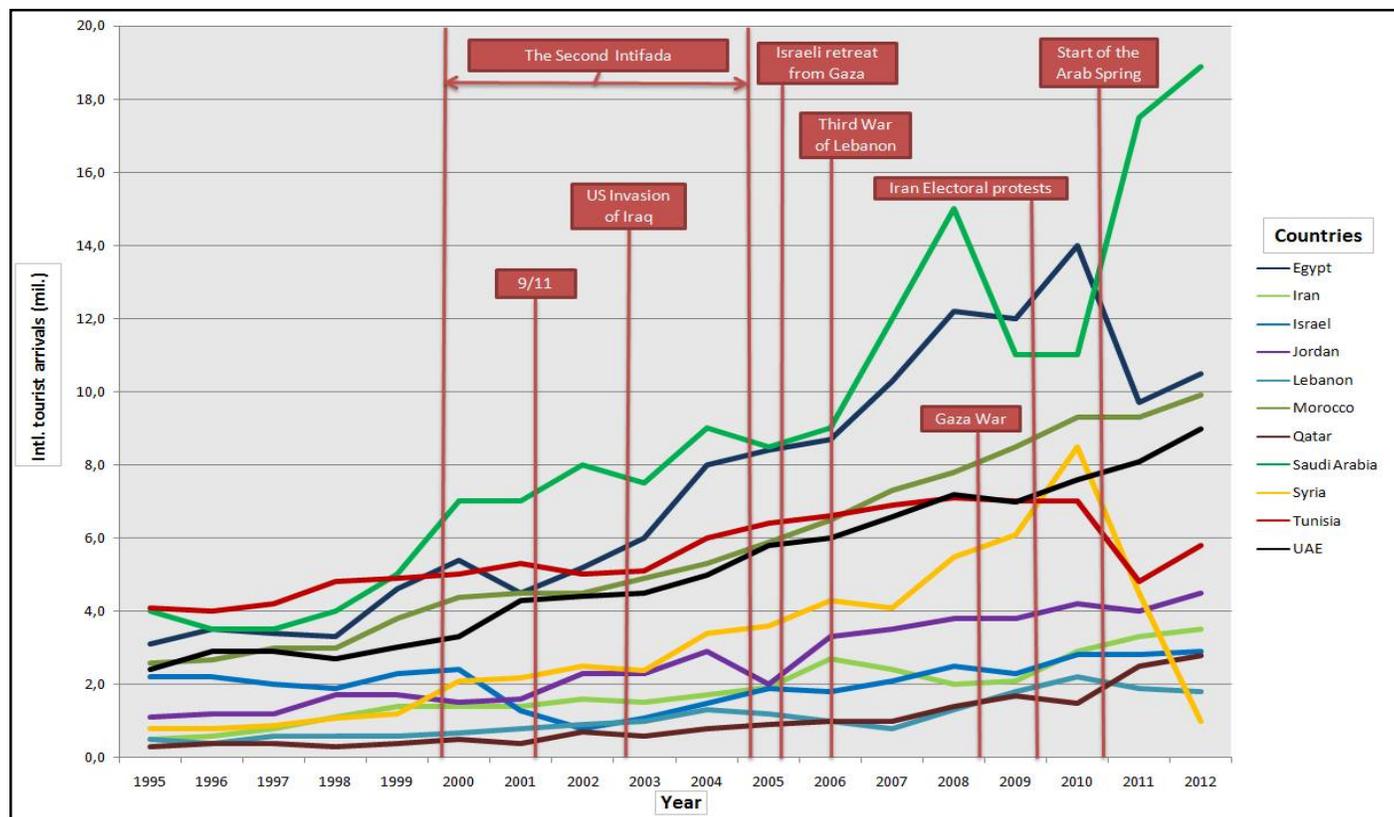
Israel's image and from a tourist point of view, another slight drop in international arrivals.

After the end of this war, the level of foreign visitors to Israel maintained itself around the level of 3 million a year, which could be considered a recovery. But this is only one side of the picture. On the Palestinian side of the separation fence which was built as a result of the Second Intifada, tourism had much to suffer. The clearest example is Bethlehem. After the section of the wall that surrounded Bethlehem was completed, the number of visitors to this town plummeted to a record low and the situation remained unchanged for seven years. 2010 was the first year that saw a significant growth in tourists, up 60% from the levels of the previous year⁴⁵. This increase was owed to a slight relaxation of Israeli security measures. Up until that point most tourists that did choose to visit Bethlehem did it mostly in the form of day trips. But even with this breakthrough, the numbers of visitors are still under the pre Intifada levels and it is anticipated that as long as the current security measures, which involve among others an up to 90 minutes wait at an Israeli checkpoint are maintained, chances of normalization are quite slim.

Even though the events of the 11th of September 2001 took place in New York, which is very far from the Middle East, they did turn the world's attention to this part of the world because the hijackers were all nationals of the Middle East: 15 Saudis, 2 Emiratis, one Egyptian and one Lebanese – all Muslims. Osama bin Laden (1957-2011), the mastermind behind the attacks was Saudi as well⁴⁶. Even though this event led to tighter security in airports all around the world, it did not cause any major disruptions in the tourist circulation of the Middle East.

The fluctuations in international tourist arrivals of Saudi Arabia may be considered to be a consequence of the image created in the collective thinking of the world by the link between Saudi Arabia and 9/11 and also by the proximity of Saudi Arabia to the neighboring nation of Iraq. The Republic of Iraq, which was under the leadership of Saddam Hussein until 2003 was the scene of a US led invasion in March 2003. The motivation of this invasion was given by the alleged weapons of mass destruction stored by the Ba'athist regime. A second alleged reason was the intention of the USA to install a friendlier regime which would facilitate its access to the country's vast oil reserves⁴⁷. The Invasion of Iraq did not have any effects whatsoever on the tourist flows of other Middle Eastern nations.

Another highly publicized conflict was The Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006, which took place not long after the withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian forces from Lebanon. These troops were present in Lebanon ever since the early 80's which were the scene of two wars in Lebanon. Even though both of these are largely viewed as civil wars, both have had a significant implication of The Jewish State. Israeli troops occupied the area south of the Litani River, while the Syrians had a significant presence in the north of the country.



Source: Own work based on data in Blake and Chiesa (2013), p. 158, 200, 204, 212, 226, 258, 302, 348 and Blake and Chiesa (2011), 348, 362.

Figure-2

The evolution of international tourist arrivals between 1995 and 2012 in 11 countries of The Greater Middle East, with major conflicts highlighted

The reason that triggered the 2006 war was the abduction of two Israeli soldiers by Hamas⁴⁸. Being a highly publicized full scale military conflict that lasted for more than a month, it predictably led to a more than 50% drop in international tourist arrivals in Lebanon the following year. This brought Lebanese tourism to the levels since before the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces. Even though there were some minor events related to this war on Israeli soil, such as rockets hitting towns in northern Israel, the effects on the tourist industry of the invading country were inexistent.

The main recent political event in Iran was the 2009 Electoral Protests. These were triggered by discontent after the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad⁴⁹. Despite the unprecedented online coverage, especially on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook and the violent response of the authorities, the number of international tourist arrivals to Iran did not drop in 2009. Moreover, it steadily rose in the following years. However, given the extended surface of Iran (1.6 million sq. km.) and its population of over 79 million⁵⁰, the relatively low 2012 number of international arrivals of 3.5 million proves that foreigners, Westerners in particular, are still not very open to the idea of travelling there. This perception

is fueled by the fact that in the eyes of many Iran is labeled as a state that supports international terrorism and even as a state that is allegedly secretly developing a nuclear weapons program.

The most recent political event of the Middle East was The Arab Spring, a chain of revolutions directed at the authoritarian regimes that governed most of The Arab World. The first of these revolutions was that of Tunisia which started in December 2010 and ended up with the overthrow of the country's head of state, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali⁵¹. The following year saw major protests across other Arab nations like Egypt, Jordan, Libya and Syria. In Libya and Syria these revolutions have degenerated into civil wars. Out of all the conflicts discussed, this multinational string of revolutions has had the greatest effect on tourism in the Middle East.

In 2011 Egypt and Tunisia recorded significant drops in international tourist arrivals (over 30%). In Libya, international tourist arrivals were virtually inexistent in 2011 and 2012. But then again the trend of Libyan tourism has been a visibly and continually descending one. This period of descent coincided with the last decade of Muammar al-Gaddafi's "reign"⁵². The most

serious impact the Arab Spring has had was in Syria. In that country, the protests that started in 2011 against the rule of Bashar al-Assad and the Ba'ath Party, degenerated into a civil war that. In the period between 2000 and 2010 it can be said that the Syrian tourist industry has boomed, reaching a maximum of 8.5 million international tourist arrivals in 2010⁵³, which is remarkable for a country with Syria's characteristics. The fight that engulfed major cities like Homs, Hama, Daraa, Aleppo or Damascus have lead to a drop to just one million international tourist arrivals in 2012. Further decreases are expected, as the use of chemical weapons by an undetermined party against civilians further damaged the country's international image.

The only two countries that were completely unaffected by the Arab Spring were Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Although the countries of Saudi Arabia and Morocco have experienced minor unrest, this has had no effect on their tourist industries. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have remained unaffected by this phenomenon primarily because they do not have an Arab demographic majority for decades. Around 50% of their populations are formed today by immigrants from countries of the Indian Subcontinent⁵⁴. Furthermore, because of the wealth brought by the exploitation of the substantial oil resources, the Arab natives have a level of wellbeing comparable to that of West European or North American nations and therefore have no economical or social reason to start a revolution against the government.

Over the last decade the UAE have experienced a constant and substantial growth of international tourist arrivals. This is a consequence of the investments made by the leadership of the nation in the direction of widening the country's tourist patrimony. The most notable example is the complete reconstruction of Dubai that spanned the period following the start of the third millennium⁵⁵. The same thing has happened in Qatar after 2000, although on a much smaller scale. Nonetheless in 2011 Qatar has registered over 2.5 million international tourist arrivals, which is remarkable for a country with Qatar's size and population (11,586 sq. km. and pop. 2 mil.). The biggest marketing move Qatar has made in recent years was winning the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the world's biggest football competition⁵⁶. After the selection of the country to host the cup in December 2010, international tourist arrivals in the following year rose spectacularly more than 66%.

There are two reasons why Saudi Arabia maintained or increased its number of international tourist arrivals since the start of the Arab Spring. The first was that Saudi Arabia did not experience major protests in this period⁵⁷. The second is that Mecca and Medina, the holiest cities of Islam, are located on the country's territory and therefore represent an interest for Muslims all across the world. In fact, most of the country's international tourism is concentrated in these two locations. This interest springs from the fact that the last of The Five Pillars of Islam is the obligation of a Muslim to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime provided that he/she can afford it. This plus the fact that

Saudi Arabia has no diplomatic restrictions on any of the world's states except Israel opens the country's doors to all Muslim believers who wish to visit these holy sites. On the other hand there is a law in Mecca that forbids all non-Muslims from entering the city. The same situation applies to Medina. This makes tourism for other purposes than religion virtually impossible.

Even though Saudi Arabia has received over 18 million foreign visitors in 2012, the Middle East's biggest tourist industry is that of Turkey, both in terms of international tourist arrivals and international tourist receipts: 33 million visitors and USD 23,020 million respectively. The massive expansion of Turkey's tourist industry can be attributed to the economic boom experienced by the country after 2002 and also by the country's policy to develop its tourist potential with the express purpose of turning Turkey into a world famous destination.

The country's GDP grew 288% between 2002 and 2011⁵⁸ and the number of international tourist arrivals registered grew from 19 million in 2006 to 34 million in 2012. A certain contribution to the growth registered after 2009 was brought by the momentary downfall of Greek tourism. In 2009 and 2010 Greece experienced massive protests and strikes due to the impact of the world financial crisis. This affected the country's image on the international scene which materialized into a drop in foreign visitors. It is highly possible that some of these viewed Turkey, Greece's eastern neighbor as a good tourist alternative. Turkey was not represented in figure 2 because of the esthetic inconveniences its very high number of international tourist arrivals would have caused.

Finally, Morocco is the last major tourist industry of the Middle East. It does not house any major sacred attractions, which makes it much less liked to stir controversies like other destinations discussed in the first part of this paper. Furthermore, Moroccan involvement in matters surrounding the Israeli Palestinian conflict has been minimal⁵⁹. To this we may also add the geographical distance between Israel and Morocco. All these factors have been essential to keeping the peace and the political stability of the country. It is because of this political stability that the Arab Spring did not affect this country significantly. Another factor that may have alleviated the effects of the Arab Spring is Morocco's diverse ethno-linguistic structure.

This country is far from being entirely Arab, as almost 40% of the population speaks Berber languages like Tamazight, Tarifit or Tashelhit⁶⁰. The only major conflict Morocco was involved in after independence from France was the occupation of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony⁶¹. But the military side of this conflict has been frozen since 1991. Considering the peace and stability Morocco enjoys, which is not shared by many Middle Eastern nations, we can assume that this has played an important role in maintaining the nation's continuous ascending trend in international tourist arrivals.

Conclusion

Following the main points of this paper, we can draw two main conclusions. The first one is that although the religious heritage is one of the Middle East's main tourist assets, in the country that holds most religious sites, religion is both a gift and a curse. Although people who travel to Israel and the Palestinian Territories do it primarily for visiting these religious sites, it is the differences between these religious communities that gave rise to the many of today's ongoing armed conflicts. Not only do these conflicts cast a shadow of doubt in the minds of potential travelers to the region, but they have also resulted in numerous travelling restrictions for certain groups of people. When it comes to travelling to holy sites in the Holy Land, the most disadvantaged religious community are the Muslims. This is due to the fact that most of them live in countries which do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, making travel to Israel and the Palestinian Territories very difficult. Christians, Jews and Bahá'ís are much less restricted or not restricted at all when it comes to travelling to the Holy Land's religious destinations.

The second conclusion is related to the influence of former or ongoing conflicts of the beginning of the 21st century. Although there is a wide spread tendency among Westerners to apply the same label of unstable region to the whole of the Middle East, we have come to the conclusion that modern conflicts usually only affected the countries on the soil of which these conflicts were fought, without spilling their consequences in the other countries of the region.

A few examples of recent conflicts that have had visible effects on the tourist industries of the countries that were involved in them are the Second Intifada (2000-2005) in Israel and Palestine, the Third Lebanon War (2006) in Lebanon and the revolutions that were part of the international movement that came to be known as the Arab Spring.

These revolutions had visible effects on tourism in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The countries that have had ascending evolutions in the annual numbers of foreign visitors were the ones that remained unaffected by conflicts like Turkey, Morocco or the Persian Gulf states UAE, Qatar, or Saudi Arabia. The main factor that contributed to the success of these tourist destinations is the ability to keep disturbing factors like religious extremism and political instability outside their borders.

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