

# THE DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MIDDLE EAST TOURIST

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Tourism and Hospitality promote economic benefits for countries globally. Not only tourism contributes to national gross domestic product (GDP) but also generates employment, helps the countries to protect their cultural and natural heritages. With the help of ever increasing technology, transportation and communication, more and more people traveling these days (Jang and Cai, 2002). Especially the Middle Eastern outbound tourist numbers are increasing progressively. Moreover, the number of Muslims globally increasing, which brings the need of understanding the Muslim tourists in general and Middle Eastern tourist in particular. Given that economic strength of Middle Eastern countries, every increasing number of tourists participates in international tourism. There are several popular destinations among the Middle Eastern tourist, namely Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, and so on. Thus, the competition for attracting tourists from the Middle Eastern is intensifying.

Even though, much has been research about the motives of tourists (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer and Kim, 2003; Faulkner et al., 1999) and theories, models, frameworks have been developed (i.e. push and pull framework (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977); the travel career ladder (Pearce and Lee, 2005); hybrid models (Gomezelj and Mihalič, 2008), comparatively less research has been done on factors motivating Muslim tourist motives. This is particularly true when the subject matter is Muslim Middle Eastern tourists' motivations and perspectives, with few exceptions (Prayag and Hosany, 2014). Thus, this speech aims to provide this perspective with its current form within the destination competitiveness model. Moreover, in the case of Saudi Arabia, government has a strategic plan, Vision 2030. This speech will also highlight the main points from the Vision 2030 that is and will be affecting Saudi tourism, both domestic and international, in the next decade.

## **Perspectives and Motivations of Middle Eastern Tourists:**

- *Family Togetherness:* The nature of family relations is socially constructed based on cultural norms. One defining characteristic is that of interdependency between family members. Middle Eastern families prefer destinations where they are able to enjoy tourism together.
- *Appreciating Natural Resources:* During the past years, societies have been changing towards urbanization. Urbanization has to lead to a separation between the human beings and nature. Providing access to such areas where the reconnection to nature can occur in a sustainable manner is sought after by the middle eastern tourist.
- *Escaping from Daily Routine:* Daily routines and the constant demands of work and social relations puts a strain on the psyche is relieved by vacations. People tend to use the

same routes to work and usually have a pattern in their day to day activities. In a sense, the word experienced becomes smaller and limited by the area between home and work.

- *Visiting Other Muslim Societies:* Tourism offers endless opportunities to interact with different cultures. Having said that Middle Eastern tourists prefer to experience different cultures which are perceived interesting, yet they prefer destinations to have Islamic values. For instance they would prefer Turkey or Malaysia over Japan for this reason.
- *Natural and Cultural Attractions:* Middle East is blessed with various natural and cultural attractions yet Middle Eastern people still crave for more. Turkey, with its diverse and rich natural and cultural attractions, ranks high on Middle Eastern tourists' list to satisfy these cravings. Moreover, Turkey is a very tourist friendly country with reasonable expectations from and restrictions on the tourists. This ensures an optimal tourist experience.
- *Customized Amenities and Facilities:* Turkey being a Muslim country inherently provides basic amenities and facilities to Muslim tourists. Moreover, so many hoteliers in Turkey customized their amenities and facilities to accommodate Muslim tourists and to maximize their satisfaction.
- *Customized Activities:* In align with the above point, some Turkish hoteliers provide customized (Muslim friendly) activities to their Middle Eastern guests.
- *Halal Food and Beverage:* Food and beverage is vital part of the holiday experience. Especially if there are some strict dietary requirements exist. Hotel and restaurants not only need to provide Halal food and beverage option but also be extra cautious not to have cross contamination. Only by doing so they can fulfill the expectations of Middle Eastern tourists and hope their repeat business.

### **Vision 2030 and its Effect on Saudi Arabian Tourism**

H.E. Mohammad Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (2017, p. 6), Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, described Vision 2030 as "...an ambitious yet achievable blueprint, which expresses our long-term goals and expectations and reflects our country's strengths and capabilities".

These points are and will be important however, the Vision 2030 will dictate the following changes in the coming decade:

- The main pillars resources are:
  - *Spiritual:* Saudi Arabia is moving towards a more modern type of Islam which is more compatible with the rest of the world.

- *Financial*: Regardless the fluctuations in the oil prices, there is a steady increase in Saudi Arabia's GDP. This will affect the welfare of Saudis and allow more of them to have the means to travel outbound.
  - *Geographical*: Vision 2030 has very ambitious projects, such as interstate railways and new airports that will increase the inbound and outbound travel. Moreover, automated entry/exit system will make traveling even easier for Saudis.
  - *Human Resources*: Saudi Arabia is a young nation with its high percentage of youth. By investing in their education and welfare, Kingdom allowing more and more of its citizens to travel outside of the country.
- *Tourism Development*: directly with the triadic theme of the vision vibrant society thriving economy which means more and more Saudis will be able to travel.
  - *Expansion in Transportation*: Kingdom will improve its transportation facilities and capabilities significantly. This will bring a dramatic increase in both inbound and outbound tourist numbers.
  - *Increasing the Wellbeing of Saudis*: The Vision 2030 will focus on improving the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of its citizens. By doing so, increasing number of Saudis will be able to travel outside the Kingdom.
  - *Leisure Pursuits*: Within the Vision 2030, Government aims to support the leisure pursuits both domestically and internationally.
  - *Increase in Social Activities*: Government targets to boost the number of cultural, entertainment and sports activities and support to these activities both inside and outside of its borders.

All in all, any tourist destination targeting ME tourist should consider the motivations and perceptions of the tourists.

**Keywords:** ME tourist, perceptions, Vision 2030,

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