

The Impact of Geopolitical Factors on Tourism in the Middle East

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Received: January 12, 2015

Accepted: March 25, 2015

ABSTRACT

The Middle East encompasses Arab countries as its core and adjacent countries such as Iran, Turkey and *Israel*. Due to its geopolitical and geostrategic location, the Middle East has attracted the attention of superpowers and different governments all around the world. This region, as a special geographical location, has witnessed the rise of great civilizations and heavenly religions and has been the domain of large empires in history with wide ethnic and linguistic diversity and great sources of energy. Tourism is a geographical, political, cultural and economic phenomenon. There is a close connection between this phenomenon and political and economic stability. In other words, there is a direct relationship between political stability and economic security on the one hand and increased levels of travel and tourism on the other. In addition, it seems that geopolitical factors can have as strong a negative impact on the promotion of tourism as they can have a positive impact. The main objective of this article is to analyze the impact of geopolitical factors on tourism in this region. The results show that there is a direct relationship between fixed and variable geopolitical factors in the Middle East on the one hand and tourist attraction indices on the other. Developments in this region, due to its specific geopolitical situation, play a decisive role.

KEYWORDS: geopolitics, the Middle East, tourism

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is today regarded as one of the driving factors for the development of different communities. Sustainable development, job creation and high turnover are among the advantages of this industry which began with the advent of the industrial revolution and the emergence of leisure in human societies. The presence of tourists in different regions depends on several factors. Security, attraction, facilities and the psychological appeal resulting from material and spiritual factors can motivate tourists to travel to different regions. Different geographical and geopolitical factors can have an impact on the increase or decrease of tourists and is a determining factor. Tourism in the Middle East, as one of the major geopolitical regions in the world, is subject to various factors including fixed and variable geopolitical factors which this study aims to explore.

Statement of the Problem:

Geography, political issues and economic trends are closely associated with tourism and affect its quality and quantity. Tourism has an impact on the environment, culture, art, lifestyle, relationships, beliefs, politics, economics and community development and can lead to changes in the economic and political attitudes of societies.

Hypotheses:

1. It seems that tourism is a geographical, political, cultural and economic phenomenon. There is a close connection between this phenomenon and political and economic stability. In other words, there is a direct relationship between political stability and economic security on the one hand and increased levels of travel and tourism on the other.
2. It seems that geopolitical factors can have as strong a negative impact on the promotion of tourism as they can have a positive impact.

Scope of the Study:

This paper studies 15 countries in the Middle East region including: Jordan, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Bahrain, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt and Yemen.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive-analytical method. Data were collected and developed using library sources including books, articles, Internet websites and pamphlets in Persian, English and Arabic.

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1. Concepts

1-1. Geopolitics

Geopolitics discusses political phenomena in the inner space of a country which traditionally includes concepts such as borders, nations, governments and land. Since every country is located at the heart of political geography, it is formed from the link between the three concepts of the nation, state and territory (Muir: 2000, 32). In the field of international affairs as in the realm of geopolitics, the topic of discussion and analysis is traditionally related to power relations in the world and the means to achieve world power and increase it (Mojtahedzadeh: 2002, 156). Factors that affect geopolitics can be divided into two main categories of fixed and variable factors (Ezzati: 2011, 78). Fixed factors are in fact natural and geographical factors. Variable factors are those that mainly involve quantity and some of them can have a geographical origin (Ezzati: 2011, 78).

1-2. Tourism

Tourism is the organization and operation of vacations and visits to places of interest within a country or in other countries (Arianpour, 2008, 470). Tourism is more of a leisure activity where the money which is collected in a permanent residence is spent in the place visited or in the travel destination by the traveller.

1-3. Middle East

The term Middle East was first popularized by American *naval historian* Alfred T. Mahan in 1902 (Rezvanian, 1979, 1). It was then used by Valentine Chirol, reporter to The Times in Tehran. Finally in 1911, the House of Lords in England formally adopted the term Middle East as suggested by Lord *Crowson* (Rezvanian, 1979, 1). The Middle East and North Africa are located approximately in the latitude between 20 and 40 degrees north in a transitional region between the tropical climate and a *mild climate*. The dominance of dryness, minimal precipitation, relatively small and heterogeneous population in terms of distribution and traditional nomadism are the main features of the region (Alasdayer et al., Darreh Mirheidar, 1991, 24). The expanse of this region begins with the south of Europe (industrial civilization) and the influence of the former Soviet Union, crosses Iran's border and the Black Sea, into Dardanelles, northern Turkey, and the Suez Canal.

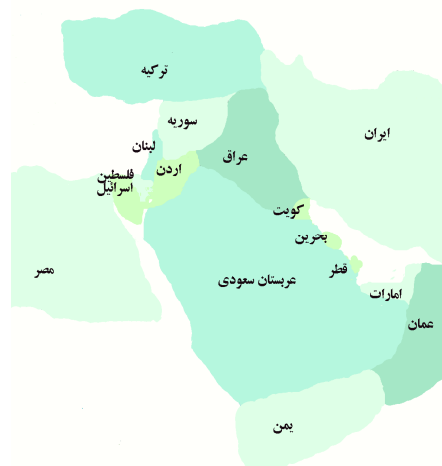


Fig 1. Map of the Middle East

Source: Author

This geographical territory is the junction between the continents of Africa, Asia and Europe and includes the most important waterways and maritime transport networks. In fact, the intersection of two ancient continents of Africa and Eurasia along the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea has led to one of the greatest encounters between the human and the natural world. The strongest and deepest political crisis in the Middle East is the Palestinian struggle. Disputes over land and sea borders are another factor in the formation, intensification and continuation of the crisis in the Middle East. In other words, there is no country in the Middle East that does not have border disputes with its neighbors. Another important factor in the region's crisis is the undemocratic political structure of the Middle East such that most countries in the region do not have a good history in democracy. Historically, the Middle East has played a critical role in commercial developments inside and outside the region. The emergence of great divine religions and the production and development of influential social and political theories have contributed to the emergence of a new situation in the Middle East (James. H. Johnson: 3-4). Natural resources have been an important source of influence in the Middle East. Oil is one of these sources with its discovery going back to the nineteenth century. Today, more than 65% of the world's oil reserves and about 40.5 of the world's gas reserves are located in the Middle East. Water is the third natural resource

that has affected the area and is a cause of tensions and divergence in the region. However, according to experts, clashes will occur in the future over water resources in the countries of the region. The Middle East and North Africa are populated by 500 million of the 6.7 billion people on Earth.

Table 1. Population of the Middle East

Row	Country	Population
□	Iran	□□□□□□□□
□	Egypt	□□□□□□□□
□	Turkey	□□□□□□□□
□	Iraq	□□□□□□□□
□	Saudi Arabia	□□□□□□□□
□	Yemen	□□□□□□□□
□	Syria	□□□□□□□□
□	Israel	□□□□□□□□
□	Jordan	□□□□□□□□
□□	United Arab Emirates	□□□□□□□□
□□	Lebanon	□□□□□□□□
□□	Palestine	□□□□□□□□
□□	Kuwait	□□□□□□□□
□□	Oman	□□□□□□□□
□□	Qatar	□□□□□□□□
□□	Bahrain	□□□□□□□□

Population in the Middle East has the region’s specific features:

1. The region’s population is scattered and nomadism is still in place.
2. Arabic population is present or physically dominant in almost all countries in the Middle East.
3. People the Middle East speak with three key languages: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and other minor languages like Kurdish, Turkmen and Hebrew.
4. The Muslim population is dominant in the region because it was the birthplace of Islam. Of course, there are also Christian and Jewish faiths.
5. There are ethnic and religious orientations in the Middle East. The conflict between Kurds and Turkmen are of potential importance.
6. The Middle East has a large poor population. Birth rate is high and yet there is a trend toward urbanization.
7. Due to the size of the population, illiteracy is one of the challenges in the Middle East.

In terms of culture and race, this region encompasses a wide variety of cultures such as Persian, Arabic, Berber, Turkish, Kurdish and Assyrian who speak Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Hebrew, and Syriac. In 2010, altogether 890 tourist sites from 142 geographical areas were registered on the World Heritage List. Of this number, 689 were cultural sites, 176 were natural sites and 26 were mixed sites (natural and cultural).

Table 2. Classification of the Middle East on the World Heritage List

Total	Mixed	Cultural	Natural	Country
□	-	□	-	Bahrain
□	-	□	□	Egypt
□	-	□	-	Iran
□	-	□	-	Iraq
□	-	□	-	Israel
□	-	□	-	Jordan
□	-	□	-	Lebanon
□	-	□	-	Oman
□	-	□	-	Syria
□	□	□	-	Turkey
□	-	□	-	Yemen

Source: World Tourism Organization

2. RESULTS

Events and trends that have little or no precedence and are rooted in geographical and geopolitical factors abound in the history of the world, particularly in the Middle East, and they have affected tourism in this region.

2-1. Natural factors

Water

In the Middle East, water is at the center of nature and was even sometimes worshiped as a sacred element (Razavian, 1980, 102). The Middle East has a subtropical climate. Due to low rainfall, high population growth and limited sources of water, many countries are experiencing water shortages. According to some experts, conflicts will

occur over water resources in the region in the future (Shokoohi, 1968, 48). The geopolitics of water will be the main issue in the arid region of the Middle East in the next few years and it will determine the fate of the region (Ezzati, 2012).

2-1. Political factors

Studying the Middle East in political terms will yield some important results that will effectively contribute to the recognition of the roots of the political crisis (Sajjadi and Kalantari: 2007, 7).

September 11th

Al-Qaeda conducted suicide attacks against the United States of America on September 11th, 2001. Since then, September 11th has been the greatest terrorist attacks against the United States of America. September 11th has had political, economic, military and security consequences for both the US and the international community.

US Invasion of Iraq

The US Army and its allies in 2003 invaded Iraq for reasons of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Iraq's government and army were destroyed in three weeks after the attack by the US and its allies in 2003.

Rafic Hariri's Assassination in 2005

Rafic Baha El Deen Al Hariri was a Lebanese politician, prime minister and economic activist. He was assassinated on February 14, 2005, caused by explosion in the way of his convoy in Beirut. Following his murder, widespread unrest swept the country and led to a sharp reduction in the number of tourists to Lebanon.

War between Israel and Lebanon in 2006

The war known as the Second Lebanese war in Israel and as the July war in Lebanon took place for 33 or 34 days between Israeli army and the Hezbollah and spread throughout Lebanon and the North of Israel.

The Arab Spring

Closed political environments, poor economies, and special governance structures, as well as the formation of a new educated urban class as a result of familiarity with new technologies and the cyberspace has led to a conflict between the government and the demands of people in the region (Faraji Rad, 2012, 15). These protests began in Tunisia, continued in other regional countries and spread to Egypt, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia and other countries of the region. These changes have had a profound impact on the countries in the region such that the economy of these countries experienced recession by the beginning of these developments.

Economic Factors

Various factors of the importance of the Middle East include a unique range of energy sources and the geoeconomics of this area. The Middle East enjoys 60% of the world's oil reserves and about 41% of the world's proven gas reserves. On this basis, the Middle East plays a very important role in the global energy supply (Nami et al., 2009). Research shows that the presence of oil and gas in the region is important for global survival and security. However, it has also been the cause of insecurity, poverty, conflict, terrorism and the destruction of human communities in the region (Faraji Rad, 2012, 25).

The Financial Crisis of 2007

The global financial crisis in 2007 began with wrong US policies and the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. It lasted until 2009 and quickly changed the status of the world economy.

Fluctuations in Oil Prices

The sharp rise in crude oil prices in 2008 had a great impact on countries in the Middle East and North Africa and caused significant fluctuations in trade exchanges, current account balance and foreign investment.

2-3. Cultural and Religious Factors

As a geopolitical factor, religion is of a particular sensitivity in this region. In fact, the main competition in the region is between Sunni and Shiite sects. However, there are other sects of Islam in this region with the centrality of these two sects (Faraji Rad, 2012, 18). The Middle East is a region with a wide variety of ideas and thoughts. Although the dominant religion is Islam, people of other religions with deeply historical roots also live in this area including Israel as the only Jewish state in the world, a significant number of Christian communities in Lebanon, Damascus and other countries in the region, and the Zoroastrians in Iran. What can be inferred from the diversity of religious sects in the population of this region is that Shiites are dominating in the Middle East in terms of majority and relative power. Other religious issues in the Middle East also relate to holy religious places in the region which play a major role in cultural, economic, and religious interactions in the Middle East. Deep religious divide between Muslim sects in this region has been a cause of unrest and tension in the region.

2-3. Tourism in the Middle East

The Middle East has witnessed the rise of great civilizations throughout human history and it has been a focus of attention for tourists. Even chaos and numerous conflicts have failed to prevent the presence of tourists in this historic region of the world. With regard to cultural connections and traditional social relations among Middle East countries, tourists go there often for cultural, historic, and religious attractions and are interested in East cultures and religions. However, places like Turkey and the UAE are significantly active in ecotourism.

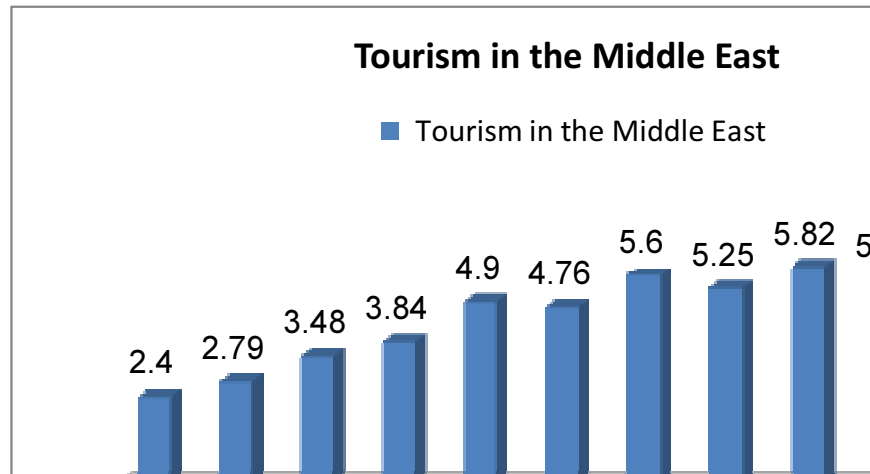


Fig. 2. Tourist arrivals in the Middle East between 2001 and 2012
Source: World Tourism

In Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt as elsewhere, the driving force for tourism originates from overseas markets especially the Persian Gulf countries.

Conclusion

Internal political instability in some countries especially after the Arab Spring and conflicts in Syria and Iraq besides the international war against terrorism and the crises arising from the global recession have led to a downturn of tourism in many countries. According to the research hypotheses and with reference to Figure 1, we can conclude based on the developments in the Middle East. After September 11, 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan by the US in 2003, the growth of tourism slowed down. Tourism in the Middle East began to grow in 2004 and 2005. However, after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2006 and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, this growing process began to decrease. In 2007, the Middle East faced a decline in tourism. After the global economic crisis between 2007 and 2009, tourism collapsed in the Middle East. In 2010, the region experienced an 11% growth in tourism. Again, this process halted with the onset of the crisis in Arab countries in 2011 and experienced a 12% reduction by the year 2012. This declining trend continues in the Middle East and some parts of the region such as Syria are experiencing a 40% decrease. With these in mind, we can firmly say that the Middle East can be host to a variety of tourists due to its climatic, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity and its natural resources and particular economic conditions. However, for the reasons noted, this region suffers deep ethnic and religious conflicts, religious radicalism, high inflation, terrorism, political instability and weak economy which are among the major factors influencing tourism in the region. These factors are mainly religious, political and economic. As a number of geopolitical factors such as religion can be used in areas such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran to encourage tourists, they can also lead to conflicts, insecurity, and a subsequent a downturn in tourism in some areas of the region such as Syria. Proper planning could lead to sustainable development of tourism in the region in the same way that UAE has managed to reduce its need for oil by investing in this sector. Due to the advent of Islam, the absolute dominance of the Muslim population, and the presence of sacred Shiite and Sunni places, the promotion of religious tourism in this area is evident particularly in Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Religious tourism is also evident among Israeli Jews and Zoroastrians in Iran

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