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**International Tourism and Political Crisis in the Arab World –
from 9/11 to the “Arab Spring”**

The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt inspired the Arab nations and the world alike. The so-called “Arab Spring” set out on its difficult sociopolitical turbulent path. Tourism industries were the first to suffer, beginning in the tourist destinations of Tunisia and Egypt, then following the path of the snowball effect of the protests, in many Arab countries. The only destination that was able to stabilize the tourism industry and to achieve growth is the UAE, mainly Dubai. The paper discusses the rise of the intraregional mobility in the Arab World and the development of new tourism trends in the post-“Arab Spring” uprisings.

Keywords: Tourism, Arab world, Arab Spring, Islamic tourism, intraregional tourism, mobility, Dubai.

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Introduction

The international tourism industries in the Arab countries have been facing serious challenges since the terror attacks of 9/11. The West European in-bound tourism markets collapsed rapidly in the day after the terror attacks in New York and Washington, DC. The tourism in countries wholly dependent on West-European tourists collapsed to all practical purposes: they had to lower their prices to such an extent that it was necessary to reduce maintenance costs on infrastructure to the absolute minimum and the employees' salaries were lowered as far as at all possible. Tunisia is the best example of these measures. Other countries like Egypt and Jordan with a good share of Arab tourists were quickly able to re-direct their marketing strategies towards Arab countries to compensate the absence of Western tourists. Indeed, these countries were able within months to reach the pre-9/11 numbers of tourists and to prevent a collapse of the industry (Al-Hamarneh,2005). Countries depending mainly on Arab tourists were able to increase the numbers of in-coming Arab tourists to a remarkable extent, especially those Arabs who, due to visa restrictions and xenophobic attitudes, preferred not to spend holidays in North America and Europe but rather to visit an Arab country. United Arab Emirates, mainly Dubai, Bahrain, Lebanon and Syria, belong to this group of countries.

New in-bound markets

Beyond the boom of intraregional, mainly intra-Arab tourism, new emerging markets in Eastern Europe and Asia were addressed: Russia, Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine, India, Malaysia, Iran and partially China have been discovered as important in-bound markets. The detachments from the mono-dependency on the West-European markets and the implementation of the strategy of diversification of the international in-bound markets with a

strong focus on intraregional tourism are the main structural changes in the industry in the post 9/11 crises (Al-Hamarneh, 2008).

Major and radical infrastructural adjustments were implemented to match the need of the new markets and the new modes of tourism: family entertainment facilities, diverse shopping infrastructure, apartment hotels for long-term family holidays, halal hospitality requirements and intraregional network of cheap airlines are some examples for these adjustments. Huge investments were done in tourism industries not only by the rich Gulf Arab countries, but by traditional big investors and governments in practically all Arab countries as well. Eased travel regulations and simplified visa regimes rounded up the structural adjustments in the region. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century the tourism industries in all Arab countries were showing good to impressive rates of growth, profit and stability.

Many losers and one winner

The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and the fall of heads of their authoritarian regimes, Ben Ali and Mubarak, in January and February 2011 inspired the Arab nations and the world alike. The so-called “Arab Spring” set out on its long and difficult political and social turbulent path. Tourism industries were the first to suffer, beginning in the popular tourist destinations of Tunisia and Egypt, then following the path of the snowball effect of the protest, in Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Libya, Syria, Morocco and Lebanon. The only destination that was able to stabilize the tourism industry and even to achieve growth is the UAE, mainly Dubai.

Political stability and personal security are paramount pillars for any tourism activity: demonstrations, street fights, civil war conditions and military interventions are indeed not good tourist marketing for any destination. The rise to power of ultra-conservative Islamist political groups in Tunisia and Egypt did not contribute positively to their attraction as tourist

magnets. Issues of tourist dress codes, especially the public discussions about the bikini, and concerning a possible alcohol ban in certain destinations increased the crises of the industry in countries with certain levels of stability in the post-uprising months. Traditional organized cultural tourism to the capital cities of Tunis and Cairo was replaced by new types of tourism: solidarity and adventure tourism as well as thousands of formal and informal journalists and academic scholars. An example for solidarity tourism was the organization of the “Global Social Forum 2013” in Tunis. The cultural tourism destinations beyond the capital cities have been suffering from huge decreases of tourist numbers and low-budget tourists: the tourism sectors in cities like Luxor and Aswan in Egypt and Sousse in Tunisia are the first victims of the post-uprising crises of international tourism. Renowned international sun-and-beach tourist destinations in remote areas, as for instance Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurgada in Egypt and Djerba in Tunisia, were in comparison less affected by the crises.

In countries where the uprisings were of more brutal character as in Libya and Syria, the tourism industries practically ceased to exist. In other countries where the uprisings have been transformed into long-term political crises with demonstrations, sit-ins and negative continuous presence in the international media, the effects vary from a total collapse of the industry as in Yemen to an instable market of the international tourism sector as in Bahrain. In the countries Jordan, Morocco and Oman, where no uprisings took place, but rather limited protests and demonstrations, the tourism industries have suffered from the negative international image of the whole region as a region of revolutions, instability, insecurity and of rising political Islamism.

The United Arab Emirates - mainly due to Dubai - is the only country that actually benefited from the turbulences in the region. In the last 10 years, Dubai has succeeded in establishing a global trade brand geographically and culturally perceived independently from the region

and the conditions in the neighboring countries: Dubai as a cosmopolitan oasis of the superlatives beyond the Middle East instabilities, the Arab insecurities and Islamic conservatism. The perceived image of Dubai based on multilayered long-term image building and marketing strategy has successfully bridged the crises years of 2008-2010 and their negative images of the city. The UAE and Dubai in particular were able to attract not only international and intraregional tourists, but regional capital and international businesses, human resources and various cultural and art activities as well.

Rise of intraregional mobilities

The primary reading of the effects of the so-called Arab Spring in the Arab World clearly shows the rise of intraregional mobilities of people, capital, ideas and images. The on-going crises of “Western” international tourism since February 2011 seems to be a long-term version of the same crises that took place after the terror attacks in 2001. While the 2001-2002 crises resulted in a massive increase of intraregional tourism, the current crises seems to restructure the whole industry towards an intraregional system of tourism mobility. Beyond the core regional countries of tourism - Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, UAE and Saudi Arabia - this system tends to include the emerging Arab tourism destinations of Oman and Qatar and the destinations in crises such as Jordan and Bahrain as well as the non-Arab countries of the wider region, namely Turkey and Iran. Jordan, for example, decided in April 2013 to decrease the entrance fees to major tourist destinations for Arab tourists. This means that the increase in the numbers of tourists from these countries would compensate the losses in the income from the paid fees. Another example is the establishment of the regular exchange of organized tourist groups between Egypt and Iran for the first time since the Iranian revolution in 1979.

To what extent the future of the intraregional tourist mobility depends on political developments, especially on the rise of political Islam, is a questions that cannot yet be answered. The signs, nevertheless, evince infrastructural changes that normally are construed as having long-term character and being politically resistant.

New trends in tourism

The major trend after the 2001-2002 crises was the rise of the so called “Islamic tourism” with its three concepts; the economic/intraregional, the cultural, and the religious conservative concept (Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2004). The major trend in the post-Arab Spring crises is the development of two parallel systems of international in-bound tourism in the Arab World:

1. The system of international “Western” tourism
2. The system of intraregional Arab and Islamic tourism

One the most important backgrounds of this development is the rise of the ultra-conservative political Islam and its acknowledgment of the economic importance of international tourism for job creation, state budget, as a resource of foreign currencies and for the international image of the country. The Muslim Brothers in Egypt and the “Al-Nahda” party in Tunisian are demonstrating pragmatic attitudes in dealing with destinations preferred by “Western” tourists. The Islamist movements are ignoring their own previous critique of libertarian lifestyles, and what is more, they are doing their best to attract more Western tourists. The change is taking place in the geography of such ‘permissive’ spaces of tourism towards more spatial isolation: gated large-scale tourist complexes, remote tourist destinations distant from major urban centers, exclusively all-inclusive offers, etc. Spatial isolation is the leitmotif of possible Islamic acceptance and further promotion of libertarian tourism. The further development of charter flights, on-location airports and on-location transportation services

designed for the ‘Western’ libertarian tourist will round up and complete the vision of spatial isolation. During the era of Bin Ali and Mubarak, certain elements of spatial tourist isolation were introduced under the term ‘security’ (Al-Hamarneh, 2012).

Other trends beside the spatial isolation are the intraregional ‘Western’ expat tourism and stopover tourism. Hundreds of thousands of Westerners working and living in the region (especially in GCC countries) are keen to have short breaks of 3-4 days in the more liberal and safe destinations: Beirut, Dubai, Sharmel-Sheikh and Istanbul are the most popular destinations. Stopover tourism is developing rapidly in the major air hubs of Dubai and Abu Dhabi followed by Doha and Cairo. For example, the approximate 11 million tourists who visited Dubai in 2012 spent only 19 million nights in the city (1.7 night/tourist). The booming cruise tourism in the Gulf could be considered a special category of the stopover tourism, where tourists spend less than 12 hours in each city. Muscat, Dubai, Salalah, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Doha and Bahrain all welcome cruise tourism.

The system of intraregional Arab and Muslim tourism is embedded mainly in religious tourism, city tourism and diaspora tourism: religious tourism is dominated by classical pilgrimage tourism to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, as well as to various holy shrines in the region. The rise of political Islam and the on-growing religiosity in the societies are giving a solid push to religious tourism of all colors. City tourism is embedded in the intraregional family tourism, cultural tourism, shopping tourism and MICE tourism. These “traditional” forms of tourism are booming in the region regardless of, or due to, the political crises in the region. Amman, Cairo and Doha are (becoming) popular destinations for international meetings and conferences dealing with the problems of the so called “Arab Spring”. The halal hospitality plays a central role in the development of both religious and city tourism. Halal food and beverage offers and settings

as well as hotels equipped with prayer rooms and prayer “needs” contribute tremendously to the development of intraregional Arab and Muslim tourism. No wonder that the biggest regional hotels management company, Rotana Hotels and Resorts Management Company, has introduced two fast-expanding halal hotel brands, Arjaan and Rihana.

Diaspora tourism is embedded on the one hand on the displays of solidarity of the Arab diaspora communities with their homeland countries. Spending vacations in the country of origin has become a kind of direct contribution to support “positive” transformations in these countries. These acts of indirect “solidarity” have been developing since 9/11, but it has developed a further meaning and dimension in the last two years. On the other hand, diaspora tourism includes family and friend visits in the Arab countries of contemporary residency. Millions of Arab citizens work and live as expats in Arab countries. For example, 500,000 Jordanians live and work in the GCC countries and around 500,000 Egyptians live and work in Jordan. Visits to family and friends are often not registered, especially in countries where tourist statistics are based on hotel overnights and hotel registration and not on issuing of visas or border crossings.

Postscript

Crises - political, social and economic- could in general be understood as opportunities as well as challenges. Tourism industries are sectors with big capital investments and are highly dependent on image, perception, security and stability. Building up a destination and a brand takes many years of hard work and marketing, but to destroy it, it is enough to make one wrong decision. The rise of political Islam and the ongoing instability are the major current and future challenges to the tourism industries in the Arab World.

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