



Connecting People and Culture through Tourism in the Mediterranean Region Roundtable on Religious Tourism

29 May 2016, Maghdouche, Lebanon

Final Report

A. Introduction

1. A Roundtable on Religious Tourism was hosted in Maghdouche, Lebanon on 29 May 2016. The roundtable was prefaced by a discussion between H.E. Mr. Michel Pharaon, Minister of Tourism of Lebanon and Mr. Taleb Rifai, Secretary General of the UNWTO, moderated by John Defterios, CNNMoney Emerging Markets Editor and which set the tone for the proceedings.
2. The participating speakers were:
 - H.E. Mr. Michel Pharaon, Minister of Tourism of Lebanon
 - H.E. Mr. Nayef Al Fayez, Minister of Tourism and Antiquities of Jordan
 - H.E. Mrs. Rula Ma'ayah, Minister of Tourism and Antiquities of Palestine
 - Mr. Mohammad Abdel Jabber Musa, Chairman of the Iraqi Tourism Board
 - Mr. Amr El Ezabi, Advisor to the Minister of Tourism of Egypt
 - Mr. Francisco Singul, Director of Culture for Saint James way, Galician Tourism Board, Spain
 - Mr. Rateb Y. Rabie, KCHS, Founder, President and CEO, Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation
 - Mrs. Dina Tadros, Managing Director and Partner, ITALÔTEL Tours, Egypt
 - Mr. Samir Sarkis, Founding Member and General Secretary of On the Footsteps of Jesus, South Lebanon Foundation
3. The roundtable was moderated by Mrs. Alison Hilliard, former BBC journalist and Head of Religious Broadcasting for the BBC World Service and Director of the Green Pilgrimage Network, set up to encourage pilgrim cities, routes and sites to become models of care for the environment.

B. The power and potential of religious tourism

4. Mrs. Alison Hilliard thanked UNWTO Secretary-General for outlining the power and the potential of religious tourism to "make a positive difference in our world by promoting peace, economic prosperity and greater intercultural and interfaith understanding."
5. The potential for religious tourism to be harnessed to this end, she noted, was clear with the recent UNWTO figures that 300 million tourists visit the world's major religious sites each year - a third of all tourists - and that approximately 600 million national and international religious voyages are undertaken annually. Further proof that religious tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry comes with the increased numbers reported annually on major pilgrimage routes. Pilgrimage routes, such as The Camino to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, report an annual 10 per

cent rise in numbers, often among non-religious and young people. And Saudi Arabia in its Vision 2030, she continued, had recently chosen religious tourism as a key strategy in its transformation from an oil economy - predicting a rise in religious tourism from 8 million to 30 million visitors in 2030.

C. Economic benefits

6. H.E. Mr. Michel Pharaon agreed with the opportunities that were opening up with the marked increase in religious tourism. This growth was, he said, evident in Lebanon: “3 years ago, for example, there were only 300-400 religious sites recognised in the country. Now there are 3,000 such sites from different denominations and religions.”
7. The increase in religious tourism can directly result in economic benefit and lead to the welcome creation of local jobs, according to H.E. Mrs. Rula Ma’ayah: “When Palestine had 1 million tourists, 5,000 people were employed in the sector. When the amount of tourists reached 2.5 million, 20,000 people were employed. When the number of tourists increase, overnights increase and this affects the economy positively and also the private sector starts investing more.”
8. Mr. Francisco Singul spoke from his experience of St James’ Way or The Camino - one of the economic success stories of religious tourism. The Camino, he said, had led to the creation of a public network of accommodation shelters and to the development of small and medium businesses which had greatly contributed to the economic development of Galicia, as well as providing employment to allow local people to stay in rural areas. H.E. Mr. Michel Pharaon agreed that religious tourism can help create small businesses supporting local communities in villages around rural religious sites and routes. This can help prevent migration from villages to towns and from towns to people emigrating from the country. He said this is why he believed that religious tourism is a vital part of the growth of rural tourism in Lebanon. He outlined how rural tourism is booming: “before it accounted for 6.7 per cent of total tourism, now it is 9 per cent. In the future it’s projected that it can reach 20 per cent. Rural tourism contributes to job creation, through festivals, eco tourism and guest houses.”

D. The resilience of religious tourism and its growth

9. Religious tourism is a key area of growth at a time of political instability and volatility in the region, according to H.E. Mr. Nayef Al Fayez: “People who come for religious tourism are resilient”. This point was taken up by Mrs. Dina Tadros who agreed that “religious tourism is more stable versus regular tourism as those who come on pilgrimage or for religious motivations are often committed to making their trip out of religious conviction. In addition, they often make repeat visits.”
10. She defined religious tourism today as embracing three categories: religious pilgrimage, religious meetings, events and conventions and travel for leisure purposes by a religious group. She outlined how it was important to understand the motivation of the 3 types of tourists who are religious tourists: spiritual (an observant religious person or a potential believer); social (someone discovering the history of their religious tradition); and cultural (a believer or non believer seeking the cultural heritage of religions). Religious tourism, she concluded, therefore has no boundaries between the religious, the cultural and the spiritual and thus can be combined with other secular tourism market segments to promote its growth.

E. The key to growth: Intra-regional co-operation

11. H.E. Mrs. Rula Ma'ayah argued that the key strategy in increasing the growth of religious tourism in the Middle East is co-operation within the region, working with the public and the private sector to promote Christian tourism and to develop new markets such as Muslim tourism. Islamic pilgrimage has grown post the Organisation of Islamic Countries approval of Islamic pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the increase of Islamic pilgrimages from Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia as well as Europe and South Africa. She believed that religious tourism could grow significantly if there was progress on allowing people from all countries to visit the region. She pointed out that Arabs used not to be able to come to Palestine but now many Coptic Orthodox Christians are visiting. She invited the Lebanese to come too.
12. H.E. Mr. Nayef Al Fayeze agreed that countries should be working together to present the Levant region as a whole as "The Holy Land". He referred back to the challenge Mr. Taleb Rifai raised in his introductory remarks about how governments in the region need to compromise and work on joint promotion of religious tourism. Mr. Rifai put forward the idea of "coopetition" - giving the example of the old bazaar or spice market where similar stores are in business next to each other and yet they are able to attract a bigger number of visitors. The image of countries in the region working together on religious tourism, could, said H.E. Mr. Nayef Al Fayeze, "send a message of hope and peace to the world that we can complement each other and this can be an antidote to how countries in the region are viewed in a negative way".

F. A new experience: A new offer with new routes

13. Mr. Amr El Ezabi stressed the importance of offering religious tourists something new to attract them to visit and then to recommend their friends to come and to make return trips themselves. He gave the example of the development of a new route in Egypt - the Journey of the Holy Family - which included 25 sites of religious significance alongside sites of natural beauty as well as The River Nile. Tourists, he said, can experience something new with "access to new types of accommodation such as monastery stays and staying with locals."
14. Mr. Mohammad Abdel Jabber Musa pointed to how Iraq was developing routes to promote religious tourism. Religious tourism now accounts for 80 per cent of total tourism in Iraq. He said that Iraq is offering religious tourism sites for Muslims, Christians and Jews to its 5 million visitors alongside developing new routes such as the one of Imam Hussein - a 500 km route on foot.
15. The creation of new routes of religious tourism was seen to be a key strategy in promote interregional co-operation. Mrs. Dina Tadros suggested that a new route "In the Footsteps of Mary" could be created to involve the countries represented at the Roundtable. This could be a route to promote religious tourism, economic opportunity and foster intercultural and interfaith understanding. This route could include significant destinations in the life of the Virgin Mary in Palestine, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. The route could be open for those of all faiths and none with Mary seen as "The Mother of All." However there would be a special emphasis on Christian pilgrims given the particular devotion of Christians to Mary. It would also be tailored for Muslim groups given the significance of Mary in Islam: Mary is the only woman to have her own chapter in the Koran.

G. The importance of involving local communities and local faith groups

16. The key to developing new routes is the involvement of the local communities, according to H.E. Mr. Nayef Al Fayez. For Mr. Rateb Y. Rabie that means it is vital to engage with and involve local faith leaders and religious authorities.
17. His organisation works to connect local faith leaders in the Holy Land with Churches in the US to bring more people to the Holy Land and to ensure that they engage with local communities, local faiths and local realities.
18. Mr. Samir Sarkis agreed on the importance of engaging with local communities and faith groups explaining how the project “On the Footsteps of Jesus” ensures that when people visit Lebanon they get to meet the descendants of people who met Christ.

H. Promoting peace: A timely dividend

19. Participants agree that involvement with local communities is one way to promote peace, tolerance and dialogue as well an opportunity to share the common values enshrined at religious sites. H.E. Mr. Michel Pharaon said that “religious tourism fosters tolerance and dialogue, which comes from getting to know and understand local communities and understanding other faiths and their holy sites and that plays an important part in promoting common values and peace.”
20. Mr. Francisco Singul noted how St James Way practically fosters a mentality of “solidary, peace and brotherhood” as a sacred route helps us understand human values. Mrs. Alison Hilliard pointed to how people were increasingly attracted to the pilgrimage values of openness, hospitality and welcome to the stranger - all values sitting in direct contrast with the messages of exclusivity and religious intolerance currently promoted in the region.

I. The Way forward: A new Network of Religious Tourism

21. In conclusion, the roundtable agreed that one practical way forward would be to set up a new Network of Religious Tourism to promote religious tourism and its benefits. It should aim to advance peace by:
 - Promoting socio-economic development (increasing jobs, generating investment and supporting local culture, products and traditions)
 - Promoting cross country and interregional co-operation
 - Promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding and the common values of pilgrimage of sacred hospitality, openness and welcome to the stranger leading to tolerance, dialogue and co-existence
 - Sharing religious tourism best practice from environmental protection to heritage preservation and new marketing strategies.
22. H.E. Mr. Michel Pharaon advocated the use of online networks, social media and mobile apps to support the Network and make it relevant and active. Mrs. Dina Tadros suggested that a mega marketing campaign was needed to market the Levant region as one product: “The Holy Land” and that tourism promoters needed to work more closely with neighbouring countries to set common

itineraries and routes. She recommended that travel could be facilitated across borders with visa free travel contributing to the significant increase in tourism flows between the countries.

J. The next steps

23. H.E. Mr. Nayef Al Fayez suggested that a timetabled plan of action to form a Network would be the next practical step and that the Network should be ambitious enough to build something in the region like the Camino de Santiago.
24. H.E. Mrs. Rula Ma'ayah also supported the idea of a Network of Religious Tourism. She suggested working with the UNWTO to bring together all the stakeholders of the sector together to discuss how this would work in practice and to identify some key projects to co-operate on. H.E. Mr. Nayef Al Fayez also lent his support to the idea of setting up a Network under the umbrella of the UNWTO and to developing the new route "In the Footsteps of Mary" as an initial joint project. Mr. Samir Sarkis proposed that 25 March should be adopted as the International Day for the Virgin Mary in Jordan and Palestine, following the example of Lebanon.
25. Mr. Francisco Singul advocated that the new Network should be promoted on an international scale and an international alliance should be developed.
26. Mr. Rateb Y Rabie suggested setting up a steering committee to develop the project.

K. Support for a new Network and its pilot projects

27. Mr. Taleb Rifai endorsed the idea of setting up a new Network of Religious Tourism under the umbrella of the UNWTO and of developing the new Marian route as a pilot project of intra-regional co-operation.
28. Mr. Hani Abu- Dayyeh, President of the Near East Tourist Agency, put forward the suggestion that "*Bethlehem Christmas Destination*," should be another pilot project adopted by the new Network. The project "*Bethlehem Christmas Destination*" is designed by a non-profit private-public partnership in Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in the city and to revitalise religious tourism, boost economic prosperity and create job opportunities in Bethlehem over the Christmas season from late November to late January. The project aims to promote an annual international Bethlehem choir festival alongside an annual international Christmas market capitalising on the unique significance of Bethlehem for Christmas, Advent and St Nicholas Day. It aims to attract regional and international choirs and Christmas cities worldwide and the 100 plus cities twinned with Bethlehem.