



# Is Islamic tourism a viable option for Tunisian tourism? Insights from Djerba



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## ABSTRACT

Interest in Muslim-oriented tourism is growing worldwide, which leads to the need to deepen and expand current scholarship on the long-neglected relationship between Islam and tourism. Tunisia was one of the first Muslim countries to promote tourism, developing its capacity to accommodate primarily Western tourists. Taking into account the political debate and institutional actions following the Jasmine Revolution, this research investigates the opinions of a group of 14 key informants in Djerba – one of the leading Tunisian destinations – regarding the possibility of developing a tourism industry closer to Muslim customers' wishes and more in line with Islamic beliefs. This study shows that the idea has not been rejected altogether but rather is of growing interest, especially among tourism industry operators. Yet, whilst the potential of Muslim-oriented tourism is recognised, developing it is not currently considered a priority.

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## 1. Introduction

Whilst the relationship between Islam and tourism was largely neglected in the past, attention on the subject has grown in recent years. Muslim-oriented tourism, for instance, is currently an emerging, but still under-researched topic in tourism literature; as is the way in which Islam can shape and influence tourism strategies in countries where Islam is the state religion or where it has significant influence. Moreover, for a long time the tourism industry did not sufficiently consider the needs of Muslims (as tourists) and Islamic prescriptions when developing tourism products.

For example, in Tunisia – a majority Muslim country – the tourism industry was developed and designed after independence in 1956, according to European tourists' demands. This strategy allowed Tunisia to become a successful player in the international tourism market for over three decades. Simultaneously, this strategy fostered dependent relationships between the Tunisian tourism industry and Western tour operators. However, the aftermath of 9/11 and the events immediately following, as well as the effects of 2002 Djerba terrorist attack illustrate the disadvantages of such an over-dependence. More recent events like the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the crisis in Libya, and the rise of a religiously-oriented political party have also led to negative repercussions on Tunisian tourism and have further confirmed the weakness of a sector that suffers from failed modernization and a lack of structural reconversion policies. The dependence on

European markets, the interest in exploiting a potentially promising market and in developing an offer closer to the Muslim sensibility, as well as the emerging role of political Islam in Tunisia have created the conditions for a salient debate on Muslim tourism.

This study investigates the perceptions of a group of key Djerbian informants regarding the possibility of developing products more closely aligned to the lifestyle of Muslim customers and more in line with Islamic prescriptions. Thus, this research tries to detect whether there is interest, attention and further signs of openness towards these kinds of products in Tunisia.

### 1.1. Tourism and Islam

Religion is not a new focus of tourism studies, but the relationship between tourism and Islam, pilgrimages aside, has long been ignored (Battour, Ismail, & Battor, 2011; Din, 1989; Henderson, 2003; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). However, in recent years interest in the subject has grown for several reasons.

First, the events of 9/11 revealed the generally-underestimated potential of intra-Arab and intra-Muslim tourism. At the same time, 9/11 clearly showed the risks and consequences of an over-dependence on Western markets, the weakness of intra-regional flows and the low purchasing power of domestic tourism (Al-Hamarneh, 2004; Kalesar, 2010). Furthermore, it highlighted a more uncomfortable issue – a feeling of mistrust towards Muslims. Stereotypes about Muslims have a long history. The Muslim world is commonly seen as conservative, anti-Western and associated with oppression and terrorism (Armstrong, 2001; Din, 1989; Morakabati, 2011; Ritter, 1975; Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2012). The effects of 9/11 and subsequent international events,

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together with the fact that the participants in the 9/11 attacks were Muslims or had Arabic origins, strengthened Western stereotypes about Islam. Muslims and the Arab world in general (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Cesari, 2004), resulting in a major negative impact on tourism (Goodrich, 2002). On a global level, there emerged a re-orientation of tourism flows, but in the United States and in the Arab world, tourism immediately declined. North American and European tourists, at least initially, deserted Arab countries, with serious consequences for those traditionally dependent on income from Western tourism, such as Morocco and Tunisia. On the other hand, Arabs and Muslims, feeling a growing hostility against them and having to deal with new rules limiting their mobility, started opting for geographically and culturally closer destinations, perceived by them as safer (Kalesar, 2010; Stephenson & Ali, 2010). Countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Malaysia managed to attract a considerably larger number of Arab and Muslim tourists (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004).

Secondly, in addition to geopolitical factors, the increasing interest in the theme of tourism and Islam is also linked to the number of Muslims in the world, now exceeding a billion and a half, and predicted to rise to 2.2 billion by 2030 (Pew Forum, 2011). Furthermore, the increased spending power and mobility of Muslim consumers imply the need for better understanding of their specific desires, habits and requirements (Prayag & Hosany, 2014). For example, the number of hotels that claim to be 'Sharia<sup>1</sup> compliant' is growing in different parts of the world, as are the number of destinations marketed as 'Muslim-friendly'. Battour et al. (2011) define this evolution as an 'Islamization' of tourism. Islamic tourism is indeed one of those concepts whose popularity is constantly growing (Al Jazeera, 2012; Jafari & Scott, 2013; Scott & Jafari, 2010), as are other concepts related to the Muslim world: "The 'Islamic' concept is also becoming fashionable in the academic world" (Stephenson, 2014, p. 161).

Nevertheless, the term is characterised by certain vagueness (Hamza, Chouhoud, & Tantawi, 2012; Henderson, 2010). "Islamic tourism is thus a growing industry, which is still only loosely defined and lacks full institutionalization" (Neveu, 2010, p. 329). The Islamic Tourism Center (ITC), which is related to the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, defines Islamic tourism as "any activity, event, experience or indulgence undertaken in a state of travel that is in accordance with Islam" (ITC, 2013). Scott and Jafari (2010), in line with Henderson (2009, 2010), limit the definition to a "Muslim, for whom religion is an important consideration, albeit not necessarily a prime motivation" (Henderson, 2010, p. 247). However, other authors – as well as the Islamic Tourism Center – extend this concept to non-Muslim tourists who are interested in Islam and travel in the Muslim world (Al-Hamarneh, 2004; ITC, 2013; Neveu, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

In this research, Islamic tourism is defined as tourism in accordance with Islam, involving people of the Muslim faith who are interested in keeping with their personal religious habits whilst travelling. This definition is not limited to travel for religious purposes and does not concern exclusively travel to or within Muslim countries.

Despite these considerations and the increased interest in Islamic tourism, developing it with consistency is not an easy task (Jafari & Scott, 2013). Firstly, it has to consider the heterogeneity of the Muslim world. "The Muslim population is by no means a monolithic group" (Stephenson, 2014, p. 162). Islam can be extremely pervasive, but the way it influences politics, economics, culture and society varies both from country to country and within the same country (Henderson, 2003). The religion's practices and observance vary greatly, and interpretations of religious practices are far from uniform as well (Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Tourism policies and choices vary, as do Muslims' compliance with the precepts of Islam, as well as their behaviours and their expectations as tourists (Vukonić,

2010). Consequently, there are different ways in which Islam can influence tourism.

For all these reasons, when it comes to developing a tourism product in line with Islam, there are several tangible and intangible elements to consider. The question does not simply end by banning alcohol or serving halal food – instead, it calls into question material and immaterial aspects, such as clothing, availability of places of worship, sexual conduct and public expressions of affection (not to mention homosexuality) or the gender and religion of staff in hotels (Battour et al., 2011; Henderson, 2010; Weidenfeld & Ron, 2008). Islam, for many followers, does not exclusively concern the private sphere; it can be a lifestyle that imposes behaviours, choices and needs that are precise and exclusive and extend into the public sphere on occasion (Aziz, 1995; Hassan, 2005). It can rule aspects of everyday life and, therefore, can permeate believers' (and so tourists') behaviours in a significant way. At the same time, this results in some conduct and behaviour of non-Muslim tourists that can be seen as particularly inconvenient and inappropriate in a Muslim context. As a consequence, in some destinations the coexistence between Muslim and non-Muslim tourism practices can be problematic. Similarly, explicit reference to Sharia can be a deterrent to some Western clientele. Moreover, indifference to Muslim practices may not satisfy the needs or requirements of more religiously observant tourists (Henderson, 2003, 2010).

However, Islam is not inherently opposed to tourism (Aziz, 1995; Hamza et al., 2012; Henderson, 2003; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Indeed, it is compatible with the Muslim faith to travel. Several passages from the Koran directly encourage travelling as a means of learning and knowledge – and also for enjoyment, though it is prescribed to follow certain specific lines of action (Din, 1989; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Further, traditionally, Islam sees travelling as a way to disseminate the religion and peacefully spread its divine message (Sanad, Kassem, & Scott, 2010). Similarly, Islam is not incompatible with the idea of a Muslim country hosting tourists from other civilizations or with other faiths. Nevertheless, Muslim countries have developed very different behaviours in cases in which tourism might be seen as a potential threat against the religion's traditions and cultural values. Some countries refused it for a long time and adopted political strategies to discourage its development (Din, 1989). Libya, Iran and Saudi Arabia are among the countries that have limited tourism flows, only showing interest to Muslim tourists or to tourists presumably aware of – and willing to abide by – a Muslim sensibility. Saudi Arabia for instance has traditionally discouraged tourism and has only recently opened to domestic tourism, limiting the presence of Westerners within the country (Mansfeld & Winckler, 2008; Sadi & Henderson, 2005).

Other Muslim countries, among them Tunisia, fulfilled their commitment to tourism as an engine of development, focusing mainly on Western tourism and showing limited interest in the impacts on local culture and sensitivities (Din, 1989; Saidi, 2011; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2012). This choice has sometimes been accompanied by an effort to limit the exposure of local populations to Western lifestyles brought in by tourists. This approach might be problematic, for instance, for those depicting the Mediterranean Sea as an interconnected space, deeply hybridised by the historical bidirectional mobility of people and values (Chambers, 2008; Giaccaria & Minca, 2011; Hazbun, 2010).

## 2. Background information on Tunisia and Djerba

Tunisia was one of the first Muslim countries to explore the potential of tourism, designing a product that Poirier calls 'Eurocentric' (Poirier, 1995). The development of Tunisian tourism resulted from a central state planning strategy, both during Bourguiba's (1957–1987) and Ben Ali's presidencies (1987–2011) (Miossec, 1999; Weigert, 2012).

The country has traditionally hosted most Western-Europeans – developing a risky over-dependence on a small number of countries (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) – through all-inclusive packages

<sup>1</sup> Literally the law, meaning the sum of moral and religious prescriptions related to Islam.

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