

Tourism Cooperation in the Levant

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Tourism offers an opportunity to promote the economic development of the Levant, demonstrate the material rewards of peace, and forge cooperation between Israel and its neighbors. To be economically sound, however, regional cooperation must generate additional tourism, rather than redistributing existing visitors. Foreign governments and international aid agencies can encourage tourism and regional cooperation by sharing their experience and funding marketing campaigns, research, and training.

Tourists visit the Levant for religious/ethnic reasons, to relax, and/or to see sights. The three primary groups of visitors are Arabs and other Muslims; Europeans; and long-distance travelers from North and South America and East Asia. Most Europeans travel to the Levant for relaxation, but long-distance visitors are more likely to come for regional tourism, and represent a potential market for regional cooperation.

Tourism is extremely sensitive to perceptions of personal and regional security. Jewish tourism to Israel is fairly constant, but Christian tourism is expected to pick up significantly as the region becomes more peaceful. The international community can provide assistance with border crossings, which generally do not function as smoothly in the Middle East as airport clearance, although more as a result of bureaucratic rather than security considerations.

The West Bank economy is so small that even a small share of tourism growth could be quite significant. The nascent Palestinian tourism industry will cater primarily to religious Muslims and Arabs from the Gulf, who will want to stay in the West Bank but may take day trips to Israel. It will depend on Israel and Jordan to provide easy access through Jerusalem and to international airports. This means the Israeli government will likely insist on knowing who enters the Palestinian area. Israelis worry that large numbers of lower-income Arab/Muslim visitors could strain the capacity of the old city of Jerusalem without spending much money, and some fear a culture clash and security threat from devout Muslims.

The Israeli tourism industry ended more than a decade of stagnation in 1993, and expects solid growth in 1994. Egypt could expand its critical tourism sector by developing natural sites like the Red Sea and Sinai to complement the "monuments" in the Nile Valley. Jordan and Syria also stand to benefit from an increased number of visitors to the region.

Ultimately, tourism revenue is largely a function of the level of development in a country, and while privatization is

preferable to public sector investment in hotels and restaurants, governments and aid agencies can fund infrastructure for remote tourism sites, research on markets and production technology for artisans, and training for workers, who remain the tourism industry's most important resource.

The most promising peace-driven projects are in the Aqaba region, focusing on environmental cleanup, port relocation, and a jointly-administered airport. Investing in border areas is also a useful way to discourage their militarization and facilitate communication and cooperation. ❖

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