

NEW LUXURY TOURISM POSSIBILITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ANALYZING THE ISRAELI PROSPECT VISITORS' EXPECTATIONS ON TOURISM IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES IN THE LIGHT OF THE RECENT PEACE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Among the immense critical situation that tourism faced during 2020, we can still find rather important accomplishments that can make us hope positively for the future recovery of the industry. One of the most recent positive news in that sense consists in the geopolitical reshaping of the Middle East region as we have known it for the past 70 years. In fact, following the new peace agreement between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain new tourism possibilities in the area await both the citizens of these countries and the rest of the world. Direct flights connecting for the first time these destinations and tour packages involving both the UAE and Israel have already been designed and are out on the market as of this month.¹ But what do the citizens of these countries actually think about the possibility of visiting each other after several decades of cool relations? This paper has the objective of analyzing the expectations and intentions of prospect Israeli visitors concerning their newly acquired possibility of travelling to the UAE and experience luxury tourism at this close by destination. The survey used to gather data on these aspects permitted me to build a positive picture of the situation, demonstrating that although doubts may still exist concerning some aspects, there is hope that in the case of modern societies, such as Israel and the UAE, relations on a people-to-people's level can be rebuilt at a fast-pace thanks to future tourism exchanges and desire to experience the other's culture.

Keywords: *Tourism and peace; post-conflict tourism; Luxury tourism; Middle East; destination image; Tourists' perception*

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¹ Information: <https://www.traveldailynews.com/post/tourist-israel-launches-the-first-ever-combined-touring-packages-of-the-region>; <https://www.touristisrael.com/tours/11-day-israel-dubai-abu-dhabi-package-tour/>; <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1760136/middle-east>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/first-plane-with-israeli-tourists-lands-in-uae-after-deal/2020/11/08/2fbfcb4-21c9-11eb-9c4a-0dc6242c4814_story.html.

INTRODUCTION

Setting the scene

As a result of the Abraham Accords signed on September 15th 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, peace, diplomatic relations and normalization were achieved. This means concretely that embassies are going to be established in each country while stability, security and cooperation possibilities in all spheres will unfold including, of course, business and tourism. Prior Covid-19 pandemics, both Israel and the UAE had strong and blooming economies. Taking into consideration that they are relatively close to each other and among the most developed countries in that area of the world, they theoretically can make the ideal business partner pair. As it is well known, the UAE greatly developed in a short amount of time thanks to the oil industry (Michael, Reisinger, Hayes, 2019) while Israel grew economically especially thanks to its technological vanguard as today's the country is labeled the "Start-up Nation" (Senor, Singer, 2009). Not only business-wise but also concerning the tourism sphere mutual interest should exist between the two countries. In fact, if we analyze tourist attractions on both sides, Israel is home to one of the most important Muslim religious sites which should be attractive for the prospect Emirati visitors. In return, the UAE are now globally renowned for the highly modern and luxurious key destinations of Dubai and Abu Dhabi which should attract the Israeli visitors as well (Michael, Reisinger, Hayes, 2019). In 2019, the UAE welcomed 16.73 million international overnight visitors² while, for the same year, Israelis departures abroad by air were more than 8.3 million: a high number in proportion to the total population of the country which was estimated at 9,136,000 residents.³ This last data information sets the stage for the analysis undertaken in this study case, since Israelis will be analyzed as the prospect outbound tourists while the United Arab Emirates as the travel destination.

Literature review

Extensive research has been made concerning the general topic of tourism's relationship with conflict and peace (D'Amore 1988; Jafari 1989; Chen 2010; Jafari J. 1989; Kim, Prideaux 2007). Experiences and conclusions vary among researchers as, if on one side it was concluded that tourism is a tool that enhances peace (D'Amore, 1988), on the other, it was considered that tourism is just a mere beneficiary of peace (Jafari J. 1989). Various studies were conducted also concerning the development and effects of tourism in critical areas such as in the circumstance of a divided nation (Kim & Prideaux 2003) and also the topic of a destination image rebuilding process following crises and/or wars was researched by many (e.g. Pizam, Mansfeld 2005). Finally, experts have also contributed to the literature by presenting the tourists' perspective and behavior in post-conflict situations through

² Gulf Business - January 23, 2020 <https://gulfbusiness.com/dubai-welcomes-16-73-million-tourists-2019/>.

³ Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel - departures <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/mediarelease/pages/2020/departures-of-israelis-abroad-2019.aspx>; population <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/media-release/Pages/2019/Population-of-Israel-on-the-Eve-of-2020.aspx>.

specific study cases. The results of these studies also offered different perspectives: while in some cases the tourists who visited a former enemy country still perceived the destination in a negative way or their perception even deteriorated after the visit (Milman, Reichel, Pizam, Avraham 2015; Anastasopoulos 1992;) in other cases, it was proven that mutual tourism exchanges improved the visitors' opinion about the former rival country (Chen, 2010).

Objectives of the research

This paper aims at bringing a new point of view on the larger topic of "tourism's relations to peace" through an inedited study case, in the hope of enriching the already existing literature. The main goal is to present, through an efficient analysis, the prospect Israeli visitors' intentions, expectations and perceptions related to travelling in a post-conflict situation, in our case identified as the UAE destination. The other novelty of this research consists in the added effort of including to the analysis undertaken also the luxury aspect of tourism. The objective, in this sense, was to verify at which extent luxury has a role in influencing the prospect visitors' intention to visit and perception of the former enemy country because clearly, in this study case, the destination chosen for the analysis is a well-known luxury destination (the UAE).

Analyzing the perception, expectations and intentions of prospect tourists in this circumstance becomes quite interesting but also challenging. As their country just came out from a long term cold conflict status with the other, we need to take into account that it may be a sensitive topic to express so soon for part of the interviewed people. Nevertheless, before tourism can even fully happen between the two nations, a research on prospect tourists' opinion must be made in order to prepare the best possible strategy that can make this exchange unfold successfully.

METHODS

In order to accomplish the objectives previously proposed, an online quantitative survey was designed to which a total of 50 Israeli nationals participated. The survey included 10 questions to be answered by selecting only one among the multiple choice of answers given (the most appropriate in the responders' point of view). The answers were, of course, designed as best as to not limit in any case the responders' real expression of thought and so positive, neutral and negative answers were offered as options at each question. To better make sense of the results obtained, the number of times a certain answer was selected was then translated into a percentage. Following, the data obtained will be presented and discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Age Identification

The survey was built for the general public and did not take into account gender or religious affiliation of the Israeli participants. However, age was considered an important data to obtain in order to better interpret the total results. 70,45% of the responders are, in this case, aged between 18-34 years old, a category that researchers identify with the Millennial Generation. Other categories of age that participated were: with a 25%, 35-55 years old and with a 4,54% responders aged 55-64. We can therefore consider that the main perspective reflected through the survey belongs to the younger generation.

Travelling and luxury tourism affordability

Further on, the responders were asked about their travelling habits and their economical possibilities in relation to travel. When asked *"How important is travelling to you?"* the great majority responded by choosing the option *"Very important"* (56,81%) while the rest chose *"Somewhat Important"* (25%) and a minority considered *"Not so important"* (18,18%) as their point of view. The option *"Not important at all"* was also given but no one of the 50 responders chose it. As reminded in the Introduction, Israeli Bureau of Statistics presented a really high number of departures of Israelis by air in 2019 and this result reflects well that the main attitude towards travel among the population is one very positive. In order to understand which type of consumer the responder is and if he/she would have the financial means to experience luxury when travelling it was asked *"How often can you experience luxury when travelling?"* This question was mainly made to develop the later discussion related to the luxury type of tourism the UAE are famous for. Only the 6,81% considers to be able to afford luxury tourism *"Multiple times a year"* while the majority, can be categorized as HNWI's (High Net Worth Individuals) or as occasional luxury consumers since they responded, respectively *"Once a year"* (40,90%) and *"On special occasions only"* (45,45%). A smaller percentage considers that they can never afford luxury and only travel on a low budget (6,81%). Therefore, as we can conclude that the great majority of the Israelis that participated to the survey can at least some times afford luxury, we can go further in investigating if they would consider the UAE as a destination in which to experience luxury or not.

Israelis' opinion on the peace agreement and perception of the United Arab Emirates

One of the main goals of this research, as stated previously, consists in the presentation of the effects of the recent peace agreement signed between Israel and the UAE on tourism intention and on the destination's image perception. Therefore, the next logical step in the survey was to ask the responders to give their opinion on the matter. This may be a sensitive topic as, surely, relationships between countries do not repair overnight. Even more so if the relationship has been broken for a longer amount of time, as in the case of Israel and the UAE. At the same time, we must not forget that developed countries such as the two involved in the discussion, are nowadays characterized by a modern fast-paced society and so one can suppose that also hostilities can be forgiven and good interactions developed faster than it was usual before.

When questioned *"What do you think about the recent peace agreement signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates?"* the Israeli responders answered with a 72,72% that this *"It's a very positive achievement for both nations."* Although some doubts on this peace still exist (18,18% responded with *"I don't have an opinion on this"*), only the 9,09% answered with the option *"I don't agree with it"*. Surely, it would be interesting to receive more answers to better understand the general population's point of view on the topic but, considering this survey's results we can agree that the majority of the Israelis seems to take positively the achieved peace with this Arab country. In fact, together with Bahrain, the UAE have been only the third Arab country in the Middle East to have signed a peace agreement with Israel since Egypt, in 1979 and Lebanon, in 1983. To reinforce this result, Israeli responders were also asked if they actually *"still perceive the UAE as an*

enemy country of Israel". Confirming their previous point of view on peace, the majority selected the answer "No" (65,90%).

Intention to visit and Attractiveness

After having established that there is a general consensus in regards to the bigger topics of travelling in general, luxury travel opportunities and the peace agreement between the countries relevant for this study case, we can move forward and analyze the data concerning the specific opinion of the interviewed Israelis on the possibility of travelling to the UAE. As a first step in this direction, the survey collected data regarding the intention of the Israelis to travel to this new destination for them. The question "*Once there will be direct flights from Israel, would you choose the UAE (Dubai/Abu Dhabi) as one of your next travel destinations?*" received the following answers:

- "Definitely would" - 38,63%;
- "Probably would" - 40,90%;
- "Probably would not" - 13,63% ;
- "Definitely would not" - 6,81%.

The multiple choice answers were designed in gradation so each responder could more realistically choose the intensity of his/her intention of travelling to the UAE or not. Therefore, one can notice that in general the majority of the survey's participants choose one of the two positive answers, transmitting us that there is a good chance that many will actually choose to travel to the former enemy country in the near future. In fact, a good number responded with the highest grade of certainty, "*Definitely would*" which is followed closely by the other positive answer "*Probably would*". To reinforce whether the Israeli general intention to visit the UAE is indeed a positive one, the survey also asked the participants if they think their family/friends would like to visit Dubai or Abu Dhabi. 59,09% confirmed that "*Yes*" giving us yet another proof that the UAE are a destination more Israeli would enjoy as tourists.

As we can see that there certainly exists a desire from the side of the Israelis to visit the UAE, one must investigate what actually would attract the prospect visitors to concretely choose the destination. Faced with the opportunity to be a visitor in the UAE's key destinations of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Israeli responders were asked what would be the main reason for them to visit those cities. The Israelis confirmed that the main attraction for them would be "*to experience the luxury of the city, the modern services and the shopping opportunities*" (40,90%). By acknowledging that the former enemy country possesses such an attractiveness related to both modernity and luxury, the majority of the Israeli responders seem not to hold against the UAE any kind of prejudice or stereotype that could be easily applied as the two countries were enemies until not so long ago. On the contrary, by choosing this answer it can be perceived a feeling of positive admiration towards the UAE and their luxury related achievements. Once again, this is not to be taken for granted as we are analyzing a post-conflict situation. Very important for this study case's analysis is also the second most chosen answer "*To learn more about their culture*" (34,09%). As many people are driven to travel animated by the desire of getting in touch with a different culture to learn about it and experience it, in this case it is even more

encouraging that the second most chosen answer was this. As other researchers stated, tourism can be a tool for peace (D'Amore, 1988). Although a peace agreement has been already signed between the governments of Israel and the UAE, it is essential to achieve peace also on a people-to-people's level (Chen, 2010). Only by learning about the other's culture, one can work towards the goal of acceptance and peace and so, by choosing this option, Israelis show a proactive desire to get to know their former enemies, the Emirati people and their culture. Although other study cases demonstrated that the perception of former enemy countries deteriorated after tourists of the rival country visited them (Milman, Reichel, Pizam, Avraham 2015; Anastasopoulos 1992), dialogue and interpersonal exchanges are experienced subjectively. In addition, also the cultural context influences these views and so only after the actual tourism exchanges between the two countries will happen, research will determine whether between Israelis and Emiratis previous perception will develop as positive or negative. Other possible attractions such as relax and leisure activities ("*For the beautiful weather and to enjoy the beaches*" option) were chosen only by the 9,09% of responders while the remaining 15,90% checked the option "*I am not interested in any of that*".

Destination's image and expectations

Before researching whether perception will change after the actual experience of tourists in our specific pair of countries, one must investigate how they perceive the destination from afar. This is why the Israeli prospect visitors taking the survey were asked to express how do they expect the UAE to be as a touristic destination towards them. The majority chose the option stating that they think Israelis will find "*A welcoming destination that offers high standards and exceeds expectations*" (68,18%). UAE's destination image is therefore one very positive in the Israeli perspective, which is relevant to point out considering, once again, the fact that the peace between the two nations was achieved just a few months before the survey took place. 20, 45% of the responders affirmed that they expect the UAE to be just "*An average destination*" and only a minority is perceiving negatively the former enemy country in relation with tourism ("*Below expectation, I think other countries can offer more*" - 10% and "*I expect it to be unwelcoming towards Israelis*" - 2,50%). Another important aspect related to destination image and expectations is safety, which becomes even more relevant when discussing about a still very recent post-conflict situation. Although in the recent years there was more of a cold war between Israel and the UAE, it is still crucial to understand if prospect tourists think that they would be safe if travelling there. Safety is, in fact, one of the most important determinants in choosing or not to travel. As peace is such a recent achievement in our case and actual tourism exchanges are still limited at the time this research is taking place, perception and not actual facts determine the prospect visitors' view on safety. When questioned "*As an Israeli tourist, would you feel safe in the United Arab Emirates?*" responders' opinions were more divided than in previous questions: "*Yes*" (38,63%), "*I don't know*" (40,90%) and "*No*" (20,45%). Uncertainty related to safety is an issue not to underestimate as tourists will logically prefer a destination where they are sure to be safe to one they have doubts about. This conflicted perception transmitted via the survey indicates the fact that marketers should pay special attention in developing the theme of

safety when promoting the UAE to Israeli prospect visitors. In our case we must consider that past enmity is a conditional factor that influences this view among Israelis. It may not be the public safety that Israelis are doubtful about but the personal safety. This data shows clearly that, even though intentions and general perception are positive towards tourism in the UAE, part of the Israelis still perceive as possibly dangerous their presence in the former enemy country.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study case was conducted with the purpose of investigating and offer an overview of the Israeli prospect visitors' intentions, expectations and perception of the United Arab Emirates as a possible tourist destination, in the light of the recent peace agreement signed between the two countries. Moreover, it was undertaken the effort to include the perspective of the luxury tourism possibility, offered at the destination, in order to see if it plays a role in determining more positively the survey responders' opinion. The online survey collected important data about:

- General opinion on travel and luxury tourism affordability;
- General opinion on the peace agreement between the two countries;
- Intention of travelling to the UAE;
- Destination image and expectations;

After analyzing the responses gathered, as it was done in the previous part of this research, we can conclude that Israeli prospect visitors are in general mostly favorable both to the political peace achieved and to tourism in their former enemy country, the UAE. Although the majority of the participants to the survey are not part of the elite but categorized themselves as HNWI and/or consumers that can afford luxury tourism only occasionally, they are positively inclined towards possibly choosing the UAE as one of their next travel destination and majority admits that the main attraction that would take them there is the experience of luxury the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi can offer. The fact that there exists also a general curiosity in learning more about the former enemy's culture is also an important information in this case because especially when treating a post-conflict situations it is not to be taken for granted. The intention to visit and the willingness to be open to the culture of the former enemy nation resulted from the survey can make tourism developers hope well for future exchanges between the two countries. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to confront these results with after-experience opinions to see if the perception of the Israeli visitors towards the UAE ameliorated or deteriorated.

The safety topic turned out to be the most problematic because there was not a definite majority leaning towards an answer. This demonstrates that the issue must certainly be addressed in order to give Israeli prospect visitors' the assurance needed to actually choose the UAE as travel destination.

As of the end of 2020 the tourism industry is facing a period of distress and hopes to recover as soon as the circumstances will allow. However, looking forward we must remember that positive achievements in tourism can be undertaken even in such difficult times. Israel and the UAE are good examples in this sense as their newly found peace is

now reshaping the Middle East as we knew it. The positive results obtained during this research allow us to conclude that, as new tourism possibilities await in this area of the world, both the luxury market as well as the general travel industry will surely benefit from this: it is an example that gives us hope for the recovery of the tourism industry in the near future.

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