

SYRIA: TOURISM RECOVERY AMIDST THE WAR



Traveling to places marked by death and tragedy is becoming a popular practice known as dark tourism, and while for some Syrians this has been a tremendous aid in returning to normalcy, for others, it legitimizes a government that they do not endorse.

For security reasons, almost all governments of the world advise against traveling to Syria as it enters its ninth year of the civil war, for which the citizens have paid a high price. **Even so, there are those who seek tourism recovery in this region, although car bombs and airstrikes are still remembered as a part of the conflict that the country experiences.**

As of November, two Russian companies began offering trips and tour packages to Syria. The tour operators, despite safety warnings, offer tours through seven cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and the worldwide famous Palmyra. The cost of these tours starts at 1,950 US dollars which does not include plane tickets, visa fees or life insurance. However, these are not the only operators offering tour packages.

Young Pioneer Tours, based in China, also offers trips through Northern Aleppo, a city that lived a four-year war and that is still in ruins. The trip by this company costs 1,695 US dollars without plane tickets, visa and insurance; and even though groups of travelers are accompanied by “government caretakers”, security warnings persist.

After becoming aware of these tours, the Russian Federal Agency for Tourism issued a recommendation to all companies to stop offering trips to Syria and advised Russian tourists to avoid visiting that country until “the normalization of the situation”.

For some, the tourism recovery is a positive thing for Syria, a country that before the war, according to its citizens, was a prosperous land. Some experts believe that tourism is a small step back to normalcy for Damascus and beyond. “I would be lying if I said [that] Syria was 100% secure, but it is much better than it was. The main highways are much safer now, and our history, our culture, our food is still here,” said Damascus-based tour guide M. Alkhousi.

But others have criticized this recovery and see it is a way to overshadow the war that is still going on and to legitimize a government that they do not endorse.

“What the tourism companies are doing now has just one goal: normalization with the regime. They are doing this to show the world that Syria is safe and that the war is over. It’s really depressing and painful to see tourists coming to your country from overseas when your house is confiscated by the regime and you can never go back home,” says Bakri Al-Obeid, a Syrian who ran a small tourism company in Damascus before the uprising began in 2011.

Visiting places associated with death, destruction, and tragedy is a modern practice that has gained strength in recent years, and it is known as dark tourism. Spending the holidays in a country at war has turned into a new phenomenon, which has been motivated by social media influencers as a way to conquer “forbidden destinations”, however, many experts recommend

caution when following these trends.

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