

RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN SYRIA ATTRACTS THOUSANDS OF IRAQIS



Despite the instability in Syria, thousands of Iraqis are traveling to the country for religious tourism. This number is expected to rise as the Syrian government allows visa-free travel for first-time visitors from Iraq.

The Syrian government is looking to boost its revenues through religious tourism amidst the financial and economic difficulties caused by the war and Western sanctions. However, **Syrian activists are expressing their concerns about the nature of Iraqi delegations coming to the country and the ideas they may bring with them to promote Shiism in Syrian society.** The Syrian Minister of Tourism, Muhammad Rami Martini, has stated that the number of visitors from Iraq to Syria is expected to exceed 300,000 by the end of this year.

The Minister also mentioned that the number of visitors could have been higher if the airports hadn't been closed due to Israeli attacks. The closure of the airports has affected regular air traffic between Damascus and Baghdad, as well as several Iraqi cities that bring tourist groups to Syria.

Airports located in areas controlled by the Syrian government have been repeatedly targeted by Israel, especially since the outbreak of the war in Gaza on October 7th. The Minister of Tourism stated that Iraqis have noticed increased regional activity and have visited neighboring markets like Lebanon and Jordan. Despite the current circumstances in the area, relations between the peoples of the two countries and their governments are specific. This leads to an assumption that the number of tourists and visitors for various purposes will increase more than expected. Martini also explained that this year witnessed a 25% increase in Iraqi visitors to Syria compared to last year.

The Syrian Minister has announced that the number of visitors to Syria has reached 1.9 million since the beginning of the year, with 30% of them being tourists from different parts of the world. This is a 10% increase from last year's 1.7 million visitors. However, the minister expected visitors to exceed two million arrivals this year, indicating a 20% increase. Unfortunately, the Israeli attacks and the war in the region have caused the cessation of flights that affected several countries, including Syria.

The Ministry of Tourism issued a statement stating that it has agreed to grant entry visas directly to Iraqi visitors from the border crossings. The Ministry expects this to double the number of Iraqi arrivals for cultural, therapeutic, shopping, and religious tourism. The Iraqi market is an important partner for the Syrian tourism sector, with the number of Iraqi visitors reaching 273,000 from the beginning of 2023 until November.

Syria has several important religious tourism sites, with many significant shrines throughout its governorates. **Some of the most notable locations for Muslim religious tourism include the Umayyad Mosque, the shrines of Sayyida Zainab and Sayyida Ruqayyah, and the shrine of Prophet Abel in the capital city, Damascus.** The Khalid bin al-Walid Mosque in Homs and the Great Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo are also significant religious sites.

Before the outbreak of the crisis in 2011, Syria was a popular tourism destination in the region, attracting millions of visitors from around the world. Unfortunately, the war has significantly impacted the tourism sector. In recent years, the Syrian government has been attempting to revive the industry by promoting religious tourism through its relationships with Iran and Iraq. However, there are ongoing concerns about the societal effects of this trend.

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