

# TOURISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE



Tourism is a crucial economic sector for many Middle Eastern countries, particularly Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. However, with the outbreak of the conflict between Hamas and Israel, the number of tourists visiting these countries has decreased significantly. Some resorts in Sharm el-Sheikh depend on Israeli tourists, but their arrivals have been halted due to the situation in Israel.

Meanwhile, hotels that rely on European tourists are also experiencing a decline in the number of guests due to concerns related to the conflict.

The ongoing economic crisis in Egypt and the pound depreciation raise concerns about a possible recession in the country's tourism sector. This is particularly worrying as tourism contributes between 10 and 15% of the country's GDP, making it a significant source of revenue for the most populous Arab country.

## **The effect is beginning to be felt tangibly**

Travel agents and tour operators in the Middle East say they will have a clearer understanding of the problem once they see how low the future bookings are, even though they have already decreased over the past two months.

Last month, Forward Keys reported that ticket sales to Egypt fell by 26% YoY, to Jordan by 49%, and to Lebanon by 74%. Interestingly, these numbers come despite the lack of official travel warnings issued by Western governments for areas in the Middle East that are far from conflict zones like Israel, Gaza, and the occupied West Bank. However, the US government has advised its citizens not to travel to Lebanon due to the recent exchange of fire between Hezbollah and Israel near the Lebanese-Israeli border. This warning was issued just before the current humanitarian truce.

According to Lebanese media, hotels in the country are currently experiencing occupancy rates between 0 and 7%, compared to at least 25% before the crisis. This happens when Lebanon's economy is going through a severe crisis, and the country heavily relies on tourism, contributing up to 40% of the national income. The tourism sector has experienced a significant decrease due to the financial crisis. Travelers have been advised to avoid going to areas in Egypt or Jordan adjacent to Israel; however, this does not apply to the most popular tourist destinations far from the shared border.

## **Tourism stagnation in Jordan**

In Jordan, the spokesperson for the Jordan Hotel Association, Hussein Hilalat, reported that there has been a 50% cancellation rate for hotel bookings in the past month. The tourism sector of Jordaniwas expected to have an occupancy rate of about 95% in the last quarter of this year, recovering from the effects of the Corona epidemic. The tourism industry in Jordan provides 11-15% of the country's national income. There were 760,000 visitors to the country in September, which dropped to 730,000 in October. Since the beginning of November, tourism activity has significantly declined, including a slowdown in the flow of international visitors and the domestic market.

Marwan Al-Nawafleh, the President of the Petra Tourist Hotels Association, has confirmed that the

tourism sector in the city is experiencing a significant decline in tourism movement and reservations, similar to what it suffered during the Corona pandemic. He stated that hotel reservations in November decreased by approximately 78% in the past month, and this percentage is expected to increase further if the war conditions in the Gaza Strip persist.

The current conflict has affected many of the Middle East's major tourist destinations, especially Israel and the Palestinian territories. An announcement by the Ramallah and Bethlehem municipalities and the Ramallah Council of Churches said that this year's Christmas celebrations would be canceled and limited to religious services as the conflict in Gaza continues.

### **Tourism in other countries in the region is also affected**

The impact of recent conflicts has not only affected Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, but has also impacted other countries, although to a lesser extent. Tunisia and Morocco have seen a decline in bookings of between 15 and 20%. Even Cyprus has experienced a dramatic drop in Israeli tourists, who previously constituted about 15% of total visitors as the second-largest group after the British. Experts agree that it is difficult to predict how long the tourism industry in the region will suffer, as a permanent truce between Israel and Hamas has not been established yet.

According to experts, if the war persists, the tourism sector will suffer, particularly the small businesses that have thrived in recent years with significant investments from young Jordanians. The Christmas season is a crucial time for tourism, but the risk might extend to the next season as the conflict drags on.

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