

MUSLIM RELIGIOUS TOURISM: BETWEEN FAITH AND GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICTS



The religious tourism of the Arab world is changing in the context of a global boom in travel and a revision of concepts of the sacred.

Greater Accessibility, Changing Experiences

According to specialists, while overtourism may not have occurred, the expansion of the opportunities for travel and the decrease in the cost of air tickets in the last two decades have qualitatively changed Muslim religious tourism.

Thus, **Hajj in Mecca, previously unattainable for most of the faithful without considerable financial and physical investments, has become widespread among the richest part of the population.** Moreover, the pilgrims began to make more frequent pilgrimages – both to Mecca (Hajj) and, especially since the beginning of the year, to perform the lesser Umrah pilgrimage. Consequently, the phenomenon of religious tourism in Islam acquired an ambiguous character: on the one hand, it overlaps with traditional pilgrimage, and on the other, it is qualitatively different from it.

The concept of religious tourism implies a blurring of the boundaries between tourism and pilgrimage; these two forms of traveling constantly interact and complement each other. Pilgrimage and religious tourism are not natural phenomena but are historically produced by the joint activity of the ministries of religious affairs and tourism, tour operators, and corporations. Thus, since the nineteenth century, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has conducted an active policy of creating institutions that have qualitatively transformed the traditional Muslim and Christian (Arab Christian) pilgrimage and given way to modern religious tourism.

Sacred Places and Ritual Movement

Anthropologists note that the phenomenon of Muslim religious tourism has certain parallels in the Catholic one: the pilgrimage is guided by the same principles as the journey of Christians to Rome or the Vatican. There are the most sacred places in the hearts of Muslims: Mecca, where the Kaaba is located, and Jerusalem. The concept of the sacred is universal in its understanding, although Mecca is the holiest city for Muslims, but the whole earth is considered sacred in Islam. However, there are objects on earth that contain the sacred because beloved people – saints – have lived there or died there.

Therefore, Maghreb Jews, European Catholics, and Muslims have approximately the same attitude towards saints, which is logical. Nevertheless, there is a radical Christian-Muslim opposition in the perception of pilgrimage. The reformist trends in Islam of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (especially the Wahhâbiyya movement) strongly condemned the pilgrimage to saints. These pilgrimages have been recognized as anti-Islamic innovation. In such a position, there is a natural reluctance to recognize the sanctity of saints. Only the pilgrimage to Mecca is recognized as a good

and beneficial act. The mass of Muslim pilgrims are guided by similar views, and they consider a journey to saints' shrines to be sinful.

The sanctity of saints in Islam is recognized, but it is considered secondary to the sanctity of Mecca. It is also curious that the pilgrims in Mecca often experience discomfort and are quickly driven away by the guards, for example, if they try to touch the cloth or the place where the Prophet Muhammad had once stood. The routes traditionally used by pilgrims (both by land and by sea) to reach Mecca are now primarily determined by airlines. The pilgrims have embarked on a faster and more comfortable journey, but the number of intermediate stops – sacred places – decreased.

Thus, in addition to the fact that the Muslim pilgrimage has become more extensive, the routes have also been qualitatively changed. Although it must be said that today there are tour operators offering group pilgrimages with a stop in Jerusalem. However, except for airlines, such pilgrims are in no way interested in visiting other attractions, except Mecca.

Speed, Status, and What Pilgrims Bring Back

These changes have had a qualitative impact on the phenomenon of Muslim religious tourism and the Muslim faith as a whole. First of all, the pilgrimage is perceived as a test – overcoming difficulties leads to a state of greater holiness and spiritual acceptance. Therefore, returning from the pilgrimage, the Muslim not only prays but also feels the gratitude of a person purified of sins – for the pain and difficulties endured. Consequently, it is the journey that sanctifies the person, and the return from the pilgrimage is accompanied by increased prestige.

A characteristic feature of Muslim religious tourism is both the separation and proximity of its participants. While each Muslim should treat all people equally, regardless of nationality and religion, during the Hajj, people, often divided into large groups, travel separately. Thus, people from different Islamic countries (Pakistanis, Indonesians, Africans, Arabs, and others) are separated during the journey and often hosted in hotels designed for people of the same nationality. Nevertheless, the coexistence of national groups creates a feeling of universality, calling people to be just and egalitarian. Moreover, the crush of people creates stress, and the main goal is to create enough hotels to accommodate millions of pilgrims. Thus, Saudi Arabia has built considerable infrastructure to accommodate both the five million pilgrims who visit Mecca for Hajj every year and those who arrive for the Umrah.

In this sense, the Muslim Hajj pilgrimage is a phenomenon of two contradictory trends – the desire of a person to find personal peace within himself and the stress caused by the mass character of the event.

There is also an ambiguity in the recognition of the sanctity of the pilgrimage. The conflicts that began to be frequently held in Jerusalem affected the ability of both Christians and Muslims – primarily the Arab ones – to visit holy places. Although they did not cancel the pilgrimage, they made it much more difficult because of the accompanying checkpoints. Moreover, during the Ramadan war of 2026, the Israelis closed the Church of Mary the Mother of God (Dome of the Rock) and Al-Aqsa Mosque. For the Muslim pilgrims, it was essential to express solidarity with the Palestinians and oppose the policy.

More importantly, the war influenced the pilgrimages of Muslims to holy places in Iraq (Najaf, Kerbalah) – they practically stopped. The hotel base has shrunk by about 95% because people do not want to gather in one place at all, and the war in Syria is also devastating. **In Iran, sacred places are attacked, and in the West Bank, many churches were destroyed over several years.**

However, in some periods, the statistics of religious tourism in Jerusalem are shown to be relatively high.

Thus, it can be noted that these changes have qualitatively changed Muslim religious tourism. Although it has become more massive, faster, and more comfortable, it has moved away from its original state, which characterized it as the highest good. However, the spread of radical Islamism and the exacerbation of political conflicts have considerably affected the pilgrimage. The original concept of the sanctity of the pilgrimage now overlaps with other views and experiences, both Islamic and non-Islamic.

Date: 2026-10-12

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/muslim-religious-tourism-changed-by-conflicts-news15661>