



Rethinking Tourism in Saudi Arabia: Royal Vision 2030 Perspective

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Abstract

Tourism is a leading economic activity in most nations across the world. The tourism industry accounts for about 5% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and gives rise to about 8% total world employment. As the number of international tourist arrivals keep increasing, the tourism industry has become a top foreign earner in both developed and developing nations. Based upon this development, countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which were not known for tourism investment before, have started to make much investment in the sector in order to diversify their economy from being a single oil-based economy. KSA as a virgin and undiscovered country can capitalize on tourism to earn more income. This paper strives to provide a synthesis overview of the KSA tourism sector in relation to novel tourism initiatives that are anchored on the country's vision 2030. In order to achieve its goals, this article analyzed available material on topics discussing tourism associated with KSA tourism activities and initiatives. Information available in the literature and various secondary sources (i.e., newspaper articles, government publications, articles, and books) helped the researcher to understand the progress KSA has made in efforts to improve tourism activities. The review revealed that the political will of KSA has taken major steps to integrate and compliment tourism as an alternative source of income (i.e., launching of tourism Visas by the end of 2019). Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is making moves to attract tourists to the country by softening some of the infamous and strict rules that existed in KSA. Moreover, the KSA Vision 2030 has plans to reduce the nation's dependence on oil, with tourism being a significant aspect of this transformation. Thus, Saudi Arabia will open-up tourism on a selected basis. The transformation of KSA will have some ramifications across the globe. KSA is undergoing a radical shift in political and economic spheres that might destabilize the entire Middle East region. Shifting from an oil dependent economy to a more tourism driven economy is likely to send shock waves among the KSA's neighbours.

Keywords: KSA, Vision 2030, Transformation program 2020, SCTH.

Introduction

The Middle East is predicted to be among the top tourist destinations in the world (Al-Sulbi, 2010) due to its virgin landscape and unique attractions. The KSA is taking a lead in tourism investment as an attempt to diversify its economic dependence on oil and gas exploration. Existing tourism activities in KSA is primarily religious tourism popularly known as Hajj (pilgrimage tourism) performed by Muslims around the world. In addition to religious tourism, KSA has unveiled it plans to diversify and increase other tourism activities such as for example, geo-tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism and ecotourism. The focus is to sustain and improve the geographical attractiveness of a country, its heritage, culture and environment (Bogari, Crowther & Marr, 2013). Furthermore, literature and empirical findings of tourism activities associated with KSA is scanty. Thus little research exists on the sustainability of tourism activities in the region, particularly KSA. Although, KSA is promoting the sector, more is needed for the Kingdom to fully leverage tourism and its associated economic benefits. Promoting tourism in KSA is possible given the increase in the number of visitors to the country in the past years. However, little attention has been paid to what encourage or motivate tourists to visit KSA. According to Madden (2018), there is a need to



understand and comprehend the implications of tourism activities in KSA from various perspectives e.g. social, cultural, political, and economic effects. In an attempt to provide initial insights and set the stage for further investigations, this paper reviewed tourism plans, initiatives and recent development in KSA relative to the Royal Vision 2030 goals. The Royal Vision 2030 entails strategies that will shift and diversify KSA's economy from being an oil-based economy to becoming a service-based economy, with little dependence on oil revenue. Of interest to this paper are the tourism initiatives and plans, therefore, the researcher's major question is centered on knowing what the major steps are that KSA is taking, in order to cope with the Royal Vision 2030 goals. Subsequently, issues addressing tourism development in KSA are discussed, and investment plans and initiatives to attract tourists are scrutinized. In addition, the article proposes the best strategies Saudi Arabia can utilize to promote tourism in line to the 2030 vision. Finally, this article examines Vision 2030 and the industrial implications.

Methodology

In this study, the author conducted a systematic literature review. Materials such as recognized newspapers, journal articles, government publications, magazines and books were used as sources of information. The diverse sources of information and data are important and valuable because they ensures that new insights and in-depth knowledge about the entire tourism process in the kingdom are better comprehended. In addition, statistical figures and projections about KSA tourism industry that would otherwise be costly and impossible to obtain were accessed. This article adopted a selective strategy by using materials that either discussed or reported tourism activities and initiates in the KSA. Information available from diverse and heterogenous sources helped the researcher to understand the progress that the KSA has undertaken to develop its tourism industry.

Tourism in KSA: History and Worldwide view

For decades, tourism activities in the KSA has revolved around religious pilgrimages, most tourists visited Saudi Arabia due to religious purposes (Henderson, 2010). Nevertheless, the industry has witnessed some changes in the last few years due to efforts by the authorities to promote tourism. Data from World Bank indicate that the KSA is among top twenty most visited countries in the world, suggesting that the number of visitors has increased dramatically (Al-Sulbi, 2010). Faith travel, 'religious tourism' or 'pilgrimage' is an important market segment, and is likely the earliest form of tourism in the world (Nicolaidis, 2016). As noted earlier, travel was mostly for associated with religious tourism, however recent reports shows that tourists visit the KSA for attraction and site viewing such as Sarawat Mountains, Hijaz, Red Sea, among other ancient ruins (Mourad & Paul, 2017).

Johnson (2010) says tentatively, the first British tourists were allowed in the country some 20 years ago. During this time, women who were under 20 years of age were allowed to visit in the kingdom only if they were accompanied by their close relatives. Many visitors went to visit Mecca. The town usually receives over three million pilgrims yearly in the months of Dhu al-Hijjah, which is an important celebration among the Muslims (Henderson, 2010). Pilgrimage to Mecca or Hajj is a significant pillar of Muslim religion, in spite the fact that non-Muslims are not allowed to visit Mecca as well as Medina regions. However, preventing visits to both holy cities will be a challenge with the new initiatives aimed at promoting tourism. As a sign of the importance of Mecca city for Muslims, HRH during the Green Arabia Conference acknowledged that "The resulting pilgrimage gave rise to Mecca as a hub of trade routes and culture..." (SCTH, 2018)



HRH added that tourism in KSA considers existing ethical values and Islamic religion principles. The religion has put in place moral, ethics and values in the structural and institutional systems. Consequently, this is resulting in a cultural and social unity that has led to one civilisation alongside the Arabian norms and values. KSA in many quarters is regarded as the spiritual home and birthplace of Islam. The country has rich attractions that stir symbolism. On the other hand, KSA is also among less accessible and conserved nations according to international visitors (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004).

KSA rules of conduct are too harsh and strict e.g. women mostly dress conservatively, with loose fitting clothes with a full-length cloak and headscarves. Moreover, the country does not condone extra marital sexual affairs, homosexual acts, adultery, drugs and alcohol intake is prohibited (Scott & Jafari, 2010). These acts are subject to glaring punishment. For instance, drug smuggling comes with death penalty as punishment. Similarly, having pornographic material and dressing in scanty clothing among women is punishable by law (Mourad & Paul, 2017). According to Daher (2007), KSA has a reputation of being too overly conservative and as such is often viewed as a closed off nation. However, with the new tourism plans, the image is set to change. KSA has negative reports regarding human rights activities. The Amnesty International latest report indicates that KSA authorities use the death penalty in many cases (Amnesty International, 2018). Amnesty International latest report further noted:

The authorities used the death penalty extensively, carrying out scores of executions. It went on to report that "Despite limited reforms, women faced systemic discrimination in law and practice and were inadequately protected against sexual and other violence (Amnesty International, 2018).

Some visitors feel there are still strict rules that discourage them from travelling to the KSA. For instance, issues on human rights are still pending, systematic discrimination against women, a forceful dress code for women and a ban on alcohol are among the factors dissuading visitors. To address and portray better image of KSA the Crown Prince lifted the driving ban and announced that women can now drive. In addition, there is ban on cinemas, which was lifted after over 35 years (Alkhalisi & Quest, 2017), further state that foreign nationals are no longer required to show marital certificates during hotel check-in's. Such progress in KSA underlines the great milestone the kingdom has taken to promote international tourism. Nonetheless, there is still scepticism regarding the strict Islamic laws that exist in KSA.

Promoting tourism in Saudi Arabia

To encourage and attract visitors, HRH in a speech delivered at the Green Arabia Conference noted that:

We are predisposed to seek stability and peace, for stability is the foundation of great civilizations, while geography and history naturally compel us to play a central role in the world and in human affairs today (Green Arabia Conference, 2014).

Change is beginning to take place in terms of tourism promotions. In December 2013 KSA announced their intention to grant visas to visitors, this initiative was unique and first times in decades (Madden, 2018). Furthermore, several public bodies, agencies and committees have been established to promote tourism activities and affairs in KSA. The Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities is such an example. The body's main aim is to promote and develop tourism with focus on supporting and encouraging tourism in the country. Additionally, the body oversees reserving the archaeological sites and antiquities. The central objectives are



to promote and develop tourism in KSA both from economic and cultural view points. HRH response to Associated Press are as follows:

Saudi Arabia is open for people that are doing business, for people working in Saudi Arabia, investing in Saudi Arabia, and people who are visiting for special purposes. And now it will be open for tourism again on a selected basis (Walker, 2018).

There has been an influx of visitors from the promotion activities. Although, many of them are for religious pilgrims, there are several tourists, who visit the nation to appreciate the cultural heritage. President of Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH), Prince Sultan bin Salman, acknowledged that hotel numbers almost doubled in the nation (SCTH, 2018). In his speech during the meeting of SCTH, HRH noted the promotion is to create more jobs for the youth in KSA. In their last board meeting, they reviewed the activation of tourist visas and indorsed the significance role that it plays in increasing tourism activities. In Argentina at the 8th Session of the Ministers of Tourism of the G20, HRH said:

I think tourism will do a great job in making reality of people who have gone into space, what we have always wanted, that people are beginning to realize that we are living in a small planet and that we really have to coexist and co-work together (SCTH, 2018).

Since KSA attracts visitors through religious pilgrims, there are several initiatives through public and private exhibitions to showcase the cultural activities for Umrah pilgrims or lesser the hajj. SCTH developed a novel tour program called Umrah Plus to promote tourism activities (Mizra, 2015). The idea is to showcase KSA and its beauty to visitors who will otherwise visit specific places and regions. Henceforth, with these initiatives' visitors can see other areas of KSA. Data from the World Bank indicate increment on the number of visitors to KSA. See figure 1.

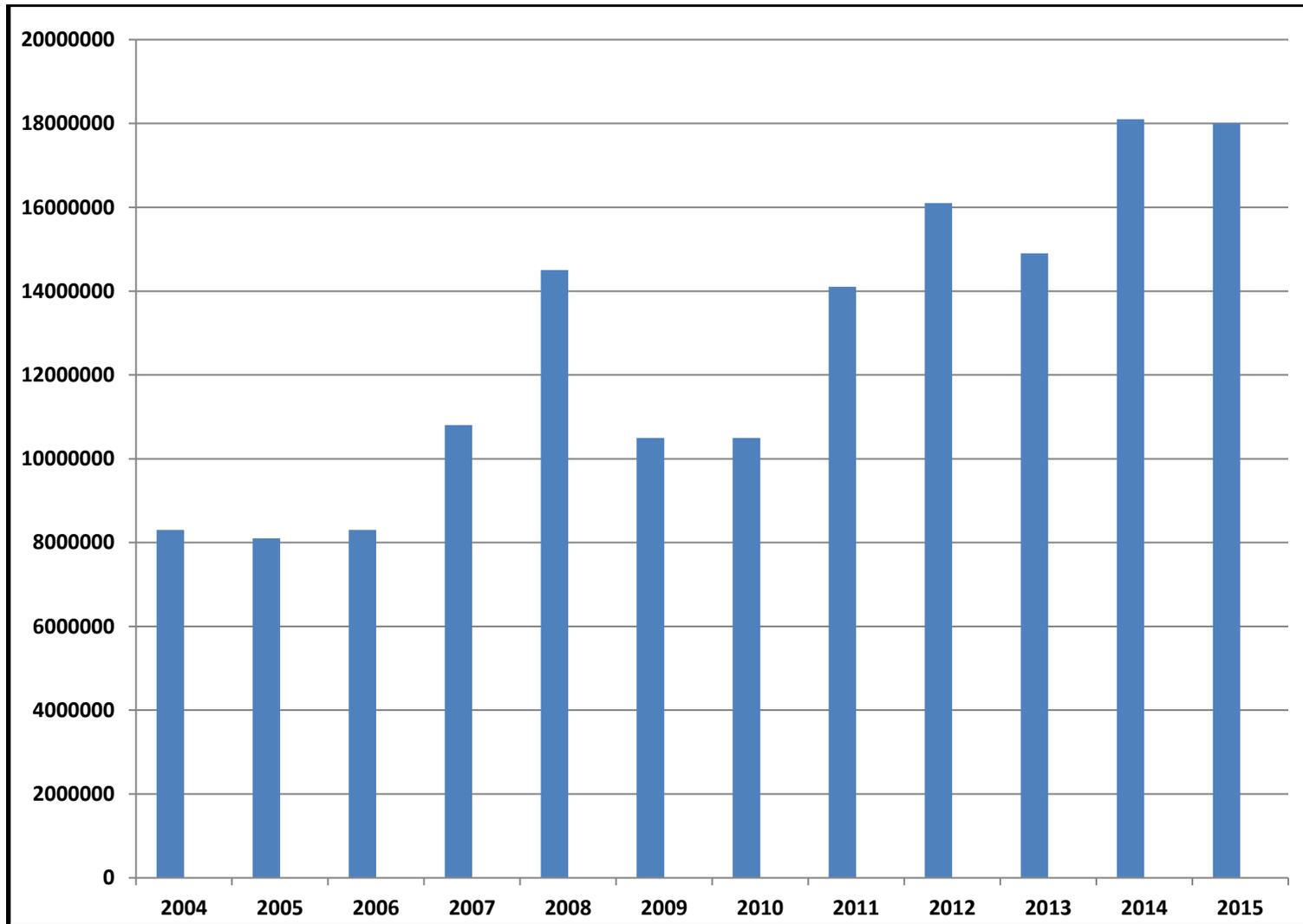


Fig. 1: Number of arrivals of visitors in Saudi Arabia (Source: SCTH, 2017)



Table 1. SWOT analysis of tourism sector in Saudi Arabia

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Good political climate for investment and the tourism sector led by Prince Sultan bin Salman. ii. The government supports tourism investment through incentives. iii. Many untapped natural, cultural heritage Kingdom natural beauty and the historical wonders. iv. Solid initiatives in place to promote tourism like programs to issue tourist visas. v. Resources availability for investing in the tourism sector. vi. Solid political will to diversify economy from single oil-based economy to other alternatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. KSA is a leading conservative nation in the world. This discourages visitors and investors from travelling to KSA. ii. The country depends so much on oil and tourism is not so famous. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Undiscovered destination (A mysterious destination). ii. Many novel opportunities exist for investments like on entertainment segment promoted by PIF. iii. Various options available for investment in hotels, resorts, and beaches Investment opportunities. iv. Great potential in investing in education and human being. v. Opportunity to invest in better holiday destinations in various towns across KSA. vi. Investment on the untapped heritage, investment opportunities exists. vii. Tapping opportunities on famous holy cities and towns like Mecca and Medina. viii. Taking advantage of the rich Islamic history famous religious for tourism investment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Terrorism activities are a leading threat to tourism venture in Saudi Arabia. ii. The strict Islamic values laws keep investors and visitors away. iii. The destination image is mainly religious; crucial prerequisite to rebrand the destination.



Competitive advantage of KSA tourism market

KSA has the opportunity and potentials to be famous destination in the Middle East. This is primarily because of its rich heritage, opulent history, and a blessing of natural beauty to harness for tourism purposes (Al-Sulbi, 2010). In recognizing this factor, the KSA has started to focus in tourism development, and the county is promoting the tourism industry to help and support the overall wellbeing of the economy. This diversification strategy is to help the nation stay afloat on the unpredictable economic times (Johnson, 2010). HRH during the 8th Session of the Ministers of Tourism of the G20 in Argentina said:

But having spoken about culture, we are very thankful for the people who have been preparing for the G20 that we cannot continue talking about tourism and the neglect talking about heritage and Culture. These two Industries are becoming synonyms and they need to be working the most synergetic (SCTH, 2018).

Several initiatives and projects are underway to promote tourism. Presently, over \$11.6 billion worth of investment is underway to help develop religious and domestic tourism, hotel investment being the focus of the project of expansion. About 70% of these projects are based in Medina and Mecca (SCHT, 2018). An elaborate plan in the name of Vision 2030 envisions in transforming KSA as a leading tourism destination. HRH announced the unveiling of the “The Red Sea” tourism project. This ambitious tourism project involves building of lagoon across 50 pristine islands. The location is at the hidden treasures that are between Al-Wajh and Um Laj on the west coast of Saudi Arabia (Hassan, 2017). During the 105th meeting of the Executive Council of UNWTO HRH noted that:

SCTH since the very beginning of its foundation in 2000, began to lay solid foundations for the national tourism industry that is capable of competing in the national and regional markets, as well as contributing effectively to the growth of the national economy, creating employment opportunities for citizens and contributing to the government’s developmental plans in the fields of social and cultural progress (SCTH, 2018).

This plan involves partnership with the leading hospitality companies. Example of such project is the Harrat Al Rahat resort that along the coastal island. It is in one of the diverse Saudi natural reserves and offers natural beauty and heritage. First phase of the project should end by 2022 (Arab News, 2017). which upon completion, will form an archipelago as well as home to environmentally sheltered mangroves, coral reefs, and other endangered marine life such as hawksbill sea turtle.

Additionally, HRH said:

SCTH collaborated with 30 foreign scientific teams from France, Italy, Great Britain, the United States, Germany, Japan and Belgium to carry out archaeological excavations in the kingdom as SCTH attaches great importance to its significant contribution to the enhancement of the cultural dimension of the Kingdom (SCTH, 2018).

Recently, SCTH announced the launch of additional initiatives, which the National Transformation Programs (NTP) 2020 approved (Vision 2030, 2018), which includes rehabilitation of handicraft centres, heritage sites, and establishing regional museums. Additionally, SCTH will rehabilitate archaeological sites for public use and register three on UNESCO World Heritage List.



KSA tourism market in comparison to neighbouring markets

Despite KSA tourism promotion and encouragement for non-religious related tourism activities. The country continues to witness fierce competition from other GCC states e.g., Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and UAE. These countries have already established their reputation and market in the international tourism stage relative to KSA. The government acknowledges that it will take time to witness an impact on the non-religious tourism sector activities (Daher, 2007). As such, KSA has in place a long-term strategy to monitor the programs launched. This is due to the time lines it will take to adapt to the regulations, and implementation of the mega projects put in place to attract international tourists.

Such flourishing of economies based on trade and caravan routes could not have been possible without the people—the same people who today are embracing modernity and applying wealth to their development: they are the descendants of those who traded with and protected caravans throughout the history of Arabia and are predisposed and receptive to building a great civilization.” HRH speech during the Green Arabia Conference (Green Arabia Conference, 2014).

UAE continues to be a hot spot and receipt of Asian visitors in the Middle East is high due to its relaxed laws, fabulous and modern structures that attract foreigners. The country became the world’s fourth tourism destination, since transformation with several world-class hotels operating in the country. KSA Vision 2030 is like the one adopted in other Gulf nations like Qatar’s National Vision 2020, Oman’s Vision 2020, Abu Dhabi’s Vision 2030, and Iran 2025, among others (Vision 2030, 2018). Saudi’s Vision 2030 seems to follow the UAE political and economic models of governance, because KSA nationals and authorities admire the UAE model that has a liberal culture, gender sensitive, and promises political and economic stability.

Recently, KSA reported that it has over 100,000 historical sites that include antiquities and museums, out of which 3,700 have been identified and registered. One of the famous cities is Mecca, which is the holiest city of Islam religion, an ancient city that dates to over 4,000 years that appeals to millions of tourists. Fig. 2 shows the tourist arrival numbers and the market share for KSA. Majority of the tourists are Muslims who visit for Hajj pilgrimage (Mourad & Paul, 2017), however, non-Muslims cannot visit the city.

Challenged by the progress of tourism industry in neighbouring countries of Dubai and Oman, HRH The Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is trying to implement the ambitious strategy that aims to attract over 30 million visitors by the year 2030 (Vision 2030, 2018). The vision 2030 Plan has the Red Sea development that should begin by late 2019, and the first phase should complete by end of 2022. This is part of the grand plan to promote tourism industry in the kingdom. Kinnimont (2017) says progress can be seen by the increase in number of visitors as in 2016, the destination attracted 18million visitors. The grand plan includes development of more luxury residential units and hotels.

Additionally, the kingdom plans to work in their infrastructure, which will include building of land, air and sea hubs (Calder, 2018). Already there are plans to turn the 50 islands under development into luxury resorts. According to the public investment fund, these developments mean the resorts will be governed according to the international standards, and this translates to more autonomy to dress up for women. In this period nations like Oman and the UAE have made significant strides in promoting tourism industry.



Appraisal approach: tourism strategy, vision 2030 and effects of tourism

Appraisal involved collection of various statistical methods to develop a segment in KSA tourism activities. Analysis incorporated several responses in a survey involving tourists. It considered the conservatives, fun seekers and variety seekers. Walker (2018) noted that the conservatives include the old, married and respondents who basically dislike entertainment activities. Fun seekers mostly consist of the young, single and respondents who prefer leisure and shopping activities. The other group of variety of seekers include the middle aged, female and singles who like vacations. It was straightforward to determine the effects of tourism in KSA.

SCTH has achieved and realized some of the efforts they have put in place to attract tourists in KSA. The body continues to witness the rise in the number of visitors. Tourism and travel have had an important impact on the economy of KSA, and has also created many job opportunities, enriched culture and heritage, and cemented relationship between individuals and societies (Kinninmont, 2017). Presently, tourism as a social and economic activity has developed to a new level. About 14.5 million domestic tourists travelled across KSA.

This translates to 44% trips of leisure and holiday purposes, about 27.5% performing Umrah, and further 19% visiting friends are relatives. During the same period, the nation witnessed 6.3 million foreign tourists visiting KSA for Umrah and Hajj, and the other visits were for varied reasons. These developments indicate how KSA is benefitting economically from tourism activities. The government spent SR35 billion to promote tourism activities, which represents 5.4% of KSA national GDP.

Moreover, the tourism industry has created about 638,000 jobs (Kinninmont, 2017). This can be seen in the Travel and Tourism Economic impact on KSA reported by the World Travel and Tourism Council. Figure 2 shows KSA's rankings out of 185 countries in terms of economic importance and contribution to the national GDP and share of employment. The data shows consistent improvement with impact expected to double by the year 2027.

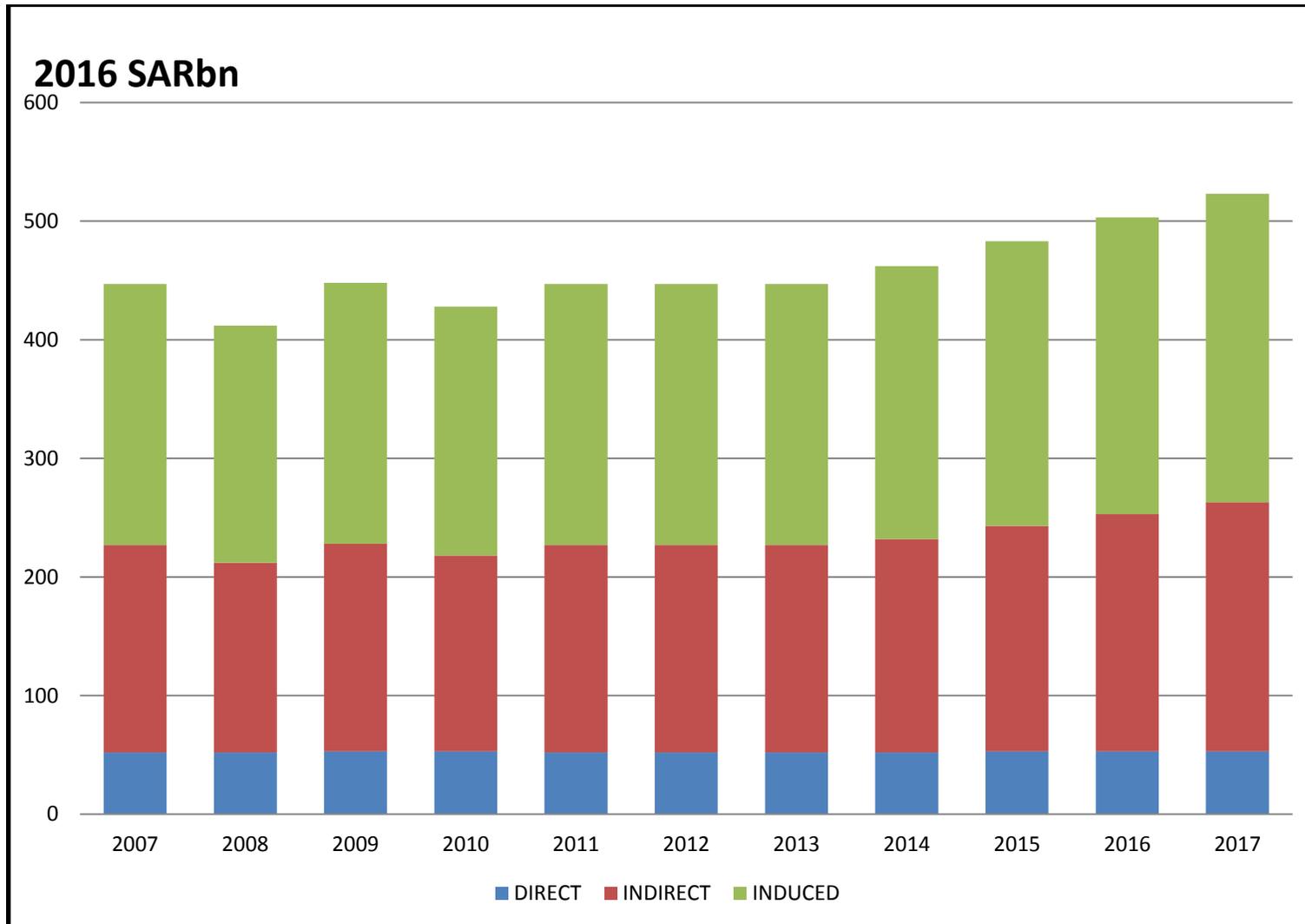


Fig 2: Total Contribution of Saudi Arabia's Travel and Tourism to GDP and Employment (Source: WTTC 2017)



The Red Sea coastline development is a great plan and strategy for promoting tourism in KSA, as it offers infrastructure necessary to grow tourism. Data indicates that over 3.2 million visitors attend exhibitions and conferences in Saudi Arabia (Vision 2030, 2018). Additionally, conferences and exhibitions are other components of tourism that continue to attract more visitors to KSA. Table 1 presents figures of conferences and exhibitions as documented by the tourism industry.

Table1: Exhibitions and conferences numbers in Saudi Arabia (Source: Vision 2030, 2018)

Tourism type	Trip number	Tourism spent	Remarks
Domestic business tourism trips -	741,000	SR 876 million	- 70% of tourists resided in hotels, furnished apartments - 61% of tourists travelled by land
Business tourism - Inbound trips	2.5 million	SR 7.7 billion	- 71% of tourist resided in hotels - Occupies 3rd place in terms of purpose of the visit to the Kingdom.
Total domestic business tourism trips	3.2 million	SR 8.6 billion	-
Business tourism - Outbound trips	680,000	SR 3.6 billion	-
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Diversifying and exploring the economic base of KSA, and resources make tourism a key economic activity in the kingdom. Tourism is seasonal, but the KSA is already reaping from the new strategies developed along Vision 2030. There is substantial growth in terms of capacity and the inflow of tourists to the kingdom. Over 95,000 hotel rooms are available, with 73,350 located in Mecca. Additionally, there are 850 hotels established, and about 20 thousand apartments, plus another 40,000 bedrooms in about 828 furnished apartments (Vision 2030, 2017). Presently, there are over 1,000 travel agents tour operators in place and there is adequate transport infrastructure under development. SCTH was founded on equity in terms of socio cultural, economic, and environmental benefits. Additionally, SCTH pillars include preservation of Islamic heritage, values and conventional hospitality. The National Tourism Development Project (NTDP) gives the appraisal that helps in developing strategy that Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) can implement.

Vision 2030 is a strategic development plan developed by the KSA to help the nation to diversify their economic base. As a nation that depends so much on oil for their economic



activities, Vision 2030 was developed to help the nation to focus on other development areas to raise more income and create jobs. This is significant for KSA as it diversifies revenue areas to stop the overdependence of oil resources and focus on other untapped sectors of the economy. Tourism is a significant sector in KSA and as stated earlier, comes second to the energy sector in terms of foreign earners. Projection indicates that the growth will spearhead the diversification of Saudi tourism industry under the Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia economy depends on tourism. The sector is a major contributor of the Saudi economy. Reports indicate that, in 2017, tourism accounted for about 6.1% of the total GDP (Vision 2030, 2018). This contribution was from both the domestic and international tourism.

The tourism sector is creating many opportunities for Saudi Arabian citizens. According to an official of the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF), the industry projects to create over 400,000 jobs in the coming years. Consequently, efforts are in place to train Saudis for jobs in the tourism sector. Currently, over 900,000 Saudi citizens are employed by the tourism and hospitality industry. The sector is further expected to employ 1.2 million people during this period up to 2030 (Khan, 2017). During the 8th Session of the ministers of Tourism of the G20 in Argentina, HRH noted that:

I think one of the great challenges now for all countries here, and especially in the Middle East is to create jobs, and we are doing a lot in the sense that it is not just job creation but sustainable, well trained and high-quality jobs (SCTH, 2018).

The GDP has been affected by the growth of tourism. World Travel and Tourism Council statistics of 2016 show a growth of 10% of GDP related to tourism. The growth is above the Middle East figure, which was reported at 9.1 per cent in the same period. In Saudi Arabia, tourism has transformed to be one of the leading job creators in the state. It is part of the government plan to increase jobs to the youth, and tourism is projected to create about 50 per cent of these jobs. This translates to about over 1.2 million jobs by 2030. In 2017, tourism sector created about 13.8 million careers, directly and indirectly (WTTC, 2017). Thus, tourism sector is a significant field for Saudi Arabia in job creation.

Already in the religious tourism sector, figures indicate that about 40 per cent of tourists go to Saudi Arabia. There is potential for this sector to expand in the coming years. Therefore, the growth of high-speed railways systems connecting Mecca and Medina, and building of more accommodation, will augment the number of pilgrims visiting the nation. Tourism will greatly benefit from the initiatives the government is undertaking to promote religious tourism. The investment plan is in line with the Vision 2030 of increasing Saudi Arabia entertainment and cultural sector through the creation of novel employment opportunities (Mourad & Paul, 2017). Additionally, it supports wealth creation, nurturing of talent among the youth and promotes the energy sector as envisioned in Vision 2030. The Destination plans to invest in various entertainment projects that include building an entertainment complex that should be complete by 2019 (Kinnimont, 2017). This should generate over 3,000 jobs to the locals and contribute a further \$2.133 billion to the economy of Saudi by 2030 (SCTH, 2018). In this period, the county expects to attract over 5million tourists.

The Vision 2030 plan developed by the government of KSA is aimed at increasing the growth of visitors to the country. Additionally, the strategic plan is aimed at helping in augmenting revenue. The numbers should surpass the ones witnessed during the pilgrimage (Calder, 2018). This can be achieved through initiatives like the month-long King Abdulaziz Camel festival. This was to give foreigners a chance of what Saudi Arabia is ready to offer visitors. They were able to sample the culture and test an experience of a nation that is not famous for vacation destinations. The event is to be repeated in 2019. Rebranding of Saudi Arabia includes liberalizations to attract female Muslim tourists. The liberalization is necessary as the



nation is more conservative and practices Islam. This drives away many potential tourists that Saudi Arabia requires (Alkhalisi & Quest, 2017). The shift affects politics in the country and HRH the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered for the arrest of several political opponents against the liberalization. This gives the Prince more control to implement his vision of tourism in Saudi Arabia (SCTH, 2018). To sum up, HRH, at the Saudi competitiveness forum 2014, said:

Tourism is the second economic sector in the Kingdom in terms of percentage of Saudization of jobs and hoped to become the first sector soon if given appropriate stimulus opportunities. The number of employees in the tourism sector has reached 751,000 until the end of last year with the proportion of nationals working in the private sector at 27%. These opportunities increased, especially after the issuance of the Cabinet resolutions on the “King Abdullah Project for the cultural heritage Care, and support for SCTH financially and administratively, which reflects State's deep concern towards the development of national tourism” (SCTH, 2018)

Discussion

Over the years, KSA has been a conservative nation, however, the country is trying to embrace tourism. The Kingdom is slowly becoming a holidaying destination in the Middle East. It has set programs in place to attract more visitors (Al-Sulbi, 2010). KSA is utilizing the Vision 2030 strategic development plan to invest on tourism activities. This is led by HRH Prince Sultan bin Salman who oversees tourism activities. KSA is trying to diversify its economy by shifting from being an oil-based economy to diversify to become a service-based economy and tourism is one of the options. The Kingdom is encouraging investors in tourism and other sectors. Additionally, the kingdom is relaxing some stringent laws that were a hindrance for tourism activities. KSA has already rolled out activities in promoting domestic and international tourism. SCTH promotes domestic tourism by organizing local festivals, these festivals across the country provide recreational social, cultural and heritable activities that are designed to attract foreign tourists. In addition, there are stimulus sales of affordable holiday packages (Mourad & Paul, 2017). HRH in an important speech during the Saudi competitive forum in 2014 stated:

I'd like to begin today by saying that Saudi Arabia fully supports tourism initiative which is based heavily on the State support and care, partnership and integration with all State institutions, the private sector and the community (SCTH, 2018).

KSA offers a variety of options for visitors ranging from religious tourism, cultural tourism, geo-tourism etc. The main towns that witness large tourism attraction are Mecca and Medina. These two towns are famous for being holy cities. They optimize the rich Islamic history and are thus famous for religious tourism. To witness the natural heritage and wonders of KSA, tourists visit other towns namely; Al-Turaif, Al-Baha. Abha, which are in the historical province of Diriyah, and Riyadh. Additionally, tourists visit the mountain resorts in Taif, historic Jeddah, ancient Nabatean tombs in Madain Saleh, heritage rock arts in Hail, among others (Madden, 2018). Public Investment Fund (PIF) is promoting the domestic travel and tourism industry by investing in the entertainment sector to minimize foreign travel and spending by the locals abroad. The idea is to boost domestic tourism activities (PIF, 2018). The initial plan is to attract tourists to historic and natural sites in the Kingdom e.g. Mada'in Saleh that is listed in UNESCO and the Nabatean settlement rock, which is curved like the site of Petra in Jordan, but it does not have crowds yet (Madden, 2018). Other places such as Jeddah, Jeddah tower, the Red Sea, Sarawat Mountains, and capital of Riyadh provide more opportunities for tourism



activities. The plan seems to appeal to visitors, as there is an increase in the number of both domestic and international visitors lately.

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List of Abbreviations

GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council

GDP - Gross domestic product

HRH- His Royal Highness Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz

HRDF - Human Resources Development Fund

KSA – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

NTDP - National Tourism Development Project

NTP - National Transformation Programs

PIF - Public Investment Fund

SCTH - Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage

UAE - United Arab Emirates

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNWTO - UN World Tourism Organization