

35. Sustainable urban tourism in MENA countries

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1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to comprehensively analyse and describe the implementation of sustainable tourism in the countries of the MENA region. The specific objectives are to:

- a. Describe the status of sustainable development in MENA and the major challenges the region faces in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- b. Review the implementation of sustainable tourism in MENA countries.
- c. Explain specific sustainable tourism applications in MENA countries and cities.
- d. Identify the future prospects for sustainable tourism in the MENA region.

An authorship team comprised on experienced regional tourism consultants and academics prepared this chapter that drew upon practitioner, governmental, and academic works. The contribution of this work is the comprehensive overview of sustainable tourism in MENA using a multi-source and multi-perspective lens. Many agencies and organisations are involved with tourism in MENA including national governments, multinational organisations such as UNDP, UNWTO, Organization of Islamic Cooperation(OIC), Islamic Development Bank, and the European Union, foreign aid agencies (e.g., GIZ, Swisscontact, USAID), the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), and multiple NGOs. Several of their contributions are recognised in this chapter.

Academic scholars are also contributing to the research literature on sustainable tourism in the Middle East, although the region is rather neglected when compared to other parts of the world. A hallmark publication arrived in 2019 with the *Routledge Handbook of Tourism in the Middle East and North Africa* edited by Professor Dalen Timothy (Timothy, 2019a). Another significant book was *World heritage, urban design and tourism: Three cities in the Middle East* by Luna Khirfan (Khirfan, 2014). The three cities were Acre (Israel), Aleppo (Syria), and Salt (Jordan). There was a special issue (in German) on tourism in the Middle East in 2020 in *Zeitschrift für Tourismuswissenschaft*, edited by Hans Hopfinger and Nadine Scharfenort (Hopfinger and Scharfenort, 2020). A special theme issue on Middle East tourism in *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes* was due for imminent publication at the time of writing this chapter, edited by Mohit Vij and Sanjay Nadkarni (Vij and Nadkarni, 2023a, 2023b). This handbook and special journal issue are a solid foundation for focusing greater research attention on tourism within the MENA region.

Individual academic articles are being written on sustainable tourism in MENA, yet they are not very plentiful. Vij and Nadkarni (2023a, p. 1) state that “tourism development in the Middle East has not been adequately addressed in academia”. A search of the Scopus database in February 2023 yielded only 64 items when entering “sustainable tourism” AND Middle East. Iranian scholars and academics based in GCC countries are the most prolific in contributions. Several of these contributions have dealt with World Heritage List sites in MENA (e.g., Khirfan, 2014; Soccali and Cinà, 2020). Other topics covered in individual academic articles and book chapters have been national parks and protected areas (Al-

Tokhais and Thapa, 2019); architectural cosmopolitanism (EL-Ashmouni, 2019); effects of smart technologies, artificial intelligence, blockchain on sustainability in MENA (Kashem et al., 2022); handicrafts (Zargham, 2007); terrorism (Mohamed and Elseyoufi, 2018); sustainable behaviour and practices for public tourism organisations (Allan and Allahham, 2021); sustainable tourism in Jordan (Reid and Schwab, 2006; Shunnaq et al. 2008); urban heritage (Orbaşlı, 2018); and urban regeneration through heritage tourism (Lak, Gheitasi, and Timothy, 2019).

The next section of the chapter provides a general background on the MENA region.

2. Background on the MENA region

MENA, the Middle East and North Africa, consists of 20 countries stretching from Morocco in the west to Iran in the east. In alphabetic order, the countries are Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Türkiye (Turkey), United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen (Figure 35.1). Palestine is also in this region and Mauritania is sometimes included.

Map of Middle East and North Africa region¹



¹Note: The disputed territory of Western Sahara is not depicted separately from Morocco, which currently administers the region.
Source: USDA, 2015

Source: Courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture

Figure 35.1 Map of MENA countries

The six African countries in MENA include Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. Two of the major MENA sub-regions are the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia) and GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE). The largest (most populated) metropolitan areas in the MENA region are Cairo, Tehran, Istanbul, Baghdad, Riyadh, Dubai, Ankara, Alexandria, Jeddah, and Amman.

The overall sustainable development status in MENA is described in the next chapter section.

3. Sustainability in MENA countries

3.1 Sustainable development in the MENA region

Vast deserts (Figure 35.3), Islam, and the Arab ethnicity are characteristics that most people associate with the MENA countries. These are part of the profile of this region; however, they definitely do not adequately reflect its diversity. The region also features extensive Mediterranean, Red Sea (Figure 35.2), and Arabian Gulf coastlines, and has significant mountainous areas. It is multi-ethnic and many different religions are practiced.



Source: *Unsplash.com, Rodrigo Dias*

Figure 35.2 The Red Sea at Sharm-El-Sheikh

With so many countries in the region, and of widely differing sizes, it is dangerous to generalise on their sustainable development status. Algeria (2.38 million square kilometres) is the largest country in the region, while Bahrain (760 square kilometres) is the smallest. The countries also diverge widely in real GDP per capita; Qatar is the highest (\$92,900) and Yemen is the lowest (\$2,500). Egypt has a population of around 108 million, while Djibouti has less than one million (CIA World Factbook, 2023). Oil production plays a major role in some MENA countries, including Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, although some others have only enough oil for domestic consumption or insignificant supplies (Institution of Civil Engineers, 2023). The International Energy Agency, IEA (2023) estimates that Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and UAE are responsible for 70% of the world's oil production. Apart from these dissimilarities, it is recognised that most MENA countries face significant sustainable development and sustainable tourism challenges.

There are in fact several sustainable development challenges in MENA. These include food security and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), sustainable water management (SDG 6), and gender and income equality (SDGs 5 and 10) (Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2018).

3.2 Sustainable tourism in the MENA region

Sustainable tourism in MENA is confronted with major challenges. For example, one noted tourism scholar (Timothy, 2019, p. 1) said that “MENA is simultaneously blessed with rich resources that appeal to a wide range of tourist types and beset with problems that challenge not only tourism development”. Many of these problems are geopolitical and, as a result, security and safety are volatile in parts of the region. Despite these challenges, MENA has rich tourism resources that support a wide range of activities and experiences.

Dinar Standard (2019) noted a “critical need for sustainable tourism” in OIC countries (which include all MENA countries, excluding Israel). However, the major challenges were lack of awareness, prioritisation of monetary gain over environmental and social issues, inadequate coordination among stakeholders, and inadequate incorporation into wider policies. Six future strategies were recommended: 1. Increasing awareness; 2. Protecting natural and cultural heritage; 3. Managing demand and seasonality; 4. Managing environmental impacts; 5. Ensuring community wellbeing; and 6. Ensuring tourist satisfaction.

The impacts of crises, natural disasters and international sanctions affecting certain MENA countries must also be mentioned as these events tend to have negative outcomes for sustainable development. The tragic earthquake in Türkiye and Syria was front-page news at the time of preparing this chapter. Some countries have experienced multiple crises and disasters over the past ten to 15 years and could be considered as multi-crisis destinations (Lachhab et al., 2023). The U.S., United Nations, and European Union have imposed sanctions on Iran for several years for violating treaties regarding nuclear arms (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). The imposition of sanctions have “paralyzed the Iranian tourism industry” according to Seyfi, Hall, and Vo-Thanh (2022, p. 372).

Civil unrest is characterised by the events during the Arab Spring that began in 2010 in Tunisia (Blakemore, 2019). The Center for Preventive Action in its *Global Conflict Tracker* indicates issues in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Türkiye, and Yemen (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). Acts of terrorism perpetrated against tourists have tarnished the image of several destinations in MENA and threatened tourism sustainability (Mohamed and Elseyoufi, 2018). These attacks have occurred in Egypt, Tunisia, and Türkiye since 2015 (Dory, 2021). Several of the UNESCO World Heritage sites located in MENA are considered in danger or have recently been destroyed by terrorism or conflict, including in Iraq, Israel, Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen (Seabra and Paiva, 2021). The Global Peace Index (GPI) rates several MENA countries among the least peaceful in the world, including Yemen (162 of 163), Syria (161 of 163), Iraq (157 of 163), Libya (151 of 163), Türkiye (145 of 163), Iran (141 of 163), Lebanon (138 of 163), Israel (134 of 163), Palestine (133 of 163), and Egypt (126 of 163) (Vision of Humanity, 2023).



Source: *Unsplash.com, Fabien Bazanegue*

Figure 35.3 Desert scene in Morocco

The next section has a specific focus on tourism and sustainable tourism initiatives in the MENA region countries and cities.

4. Sustainable tourism in MENA countries and cities

4.1 Tourism in the MENA region

In the beginning of this section, there needs to be mention of the volumes of visitors to MENA countries, which vary significantly. According to World Bank statistics, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, and Bahrain had the most international visitors in 2019. Djibouti, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq had the least. To demonstrate the contrast, UAE had 25.3 million visitors and Libya had 760,000 (World Bank, 2022). Therefore, great caution is needed in assessing the overall tourism volumes and trends for MENA, as they do not accurately reflect the situations in all individual countries.

Reasons for visiting MENA are diverse as well and there are many forms of tourism and experiences. Heritage-cultural and religious tourism are two of the most prominent types of tourism in the region. For example, one million Muslim pilgrims participated in the Hajj in Mecca (Makkah al-Mukarramah) in 2022. Many significant sites of the Christian faith are also in MENA. The region is rich in heritage-cultural treasures of a global level with a total of approximately 140 UNESCO World Heritage sites (UNESCO, 2023). Just two of perhaps the most iconic of these are the Pyramids of Egypt and Petra in Jordan. As a result of its rich resources, “the Middle East has always been a much-coveted destination” (Vij and Nadkarni,

2023, p. 1). Traditional Arabian hospitality and cuisine is a bedrock of tourism, and newer and more contemporary pursuits including adventure tourism, medical tourism, and themed entertainment are growing in appeal. Lower-cost mass tourism based on inclusive holiday packages also exists in the region.

How do MENA countries fare in world tourism development rankings? Table 35.1 shows the Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI) rankings for 13 of the 20 MENA countries (World Economic Forum, 2022). It shows that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar lead in these global tourism rankings.

Table 35.1 Travel & Tourism Development Index 2021 rankings for MENA countries

| MENA countries* | Ranking | Score | Difference from TTDI average |
|----------------------------|---------|-------|------------------------------|
| United Arab Emirates (UAE) | 25th | 4.5 | + 13.9% |
| Saudi Arabia | 33rd | 4.3 | + 9.3% |
| Qatar | 43rd | 4.3 | + 7.0% |
| Türkiye | 45th | 4.2 | + 6.4% |
| Israel | 47th | 4.2 | + 6.2% |
| Egypt | 51st | 4.2 | + 4.4% |
| Bahrain | 57th | 4.1 | + 2.1% |
| Jordan | 64th | 3.9 | - 1.8% |
| Morocco | 71st | 3.8 | - 4.8% |
| Tunisia | 80th | 3.6 | - 9.2% |
| Kuwait | 86th | 3.5 | - 11.0% |
| Lebanon | 94th | 3.4 | - 15.1% |
| Yemen | 116th | 2.6 | - 34.2% |

* Not included in TTDI rankings are Algeria, Djibouti, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Syria. Türkiye is treated as part of the European region. A total of 117 countries were ranked for 2021. Overall scores range from 1 to 7 where 1 = worst and 7 = best.

Source: Data from World Economic Forum, Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI) (2022)

4.2 Tourism trends in the MENA region

The recent catalysts for growth in international travel include the strategic location of the Middle East and its energy resources (Villar, 2021). Improved infrastructure and the addition of urban attractions increased the tourism appeal of the region as well. The varied attractions, history, heritage and cuisine of the MENA region are other drivers of its tourism growth (Vij and Nadkarni, 2023b).

More recent trends in the region have been the development of medical tourism (Mishra and Rana, 2023; Okasha et al., 2023) and the staging of mega-events including the World Expo (Dubai) and World Cup (Qatar). World Expo Dubai was held from October 2021 to March 2022 and had an attendance of over 24 million; there were 3.4 million spectators at the World

Cup games in November-December 2022 and 1.4 million visitors came to Qatar for the event (Corder, 2023; Expo 2020 Dubai UAE, 2022; Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, 2022a). Another catalyst has been the construction of major new attractions and shopping venues in cities and particularly in Dubai. The emergence of several local airlines (e.g., Emirates, Etihad, Qatar, and Saudi) and their hubbing strategies have also greatly facilitated the inflows of travellers, as have expansions and enhancements of international airports. It should be noted, however, that some sources have dubbed particular projects in the UAE as being “unsustainable tourism” (Collins, 2021).

4.3 Sustainable tourism leadership in MENA countries and cities

There are several MENA countries and cities that have demonstrated leadership in sustainable tourism and some of these are now briefly discussed.

4.3.1 UAE and Dubai

Dubai is considered to be one of the leaders in implementing sustainable tourism in MENA. The Dubai Sustainable Tourism (DST) initiative is the cornerstone of the emirate’s approach and it is recognised on the UNWTO’s Tourism for SDGs platform (T4SDG) (UNWTO, 2018). The initiative has resulted in several efforts to promote sustainable tourism, including the ‘*12 steps towards sustainability*’ manual (Dubai Tourism, 2018) and ‘*Get into the green scene*’ (Dubai Tourism, 2021a). The 12 steps toward sustainability manual is described as “the first interactive, web-based, manual under the Dubai Sustainable Tourism (DST) initiative to help hotels and hospitality establishments map out a sustainable journey and trigger a positive impact on the environmental performance of the tourism industry” (Dubai Tourism, 2018). The latter effort targeted Dubai residents and visitors to encourage them to be aware of and to use the city’s sustainable attractions.

Dubai has produced the *2040 Urban Master Plan* that “maps out a comprehensive plan for a sustainable urban development in Dubai. It focuses on enhancing people’s happiness and quality of life and reinforcing Dubai as a global destination for citizens, residents and visitors over the next 20 years”. It has the following expected outcomes: 1) green and recreational spaces will double in size; 2) nature reserves and rural natural areas will constitute 60 per cent of the emirate’s total area; 3) several green corridors will be established to link the service areas, residential areas and workplaces; 4) the movement of pedestrians, bicycles, and sustainable mobility means across the city will be facilitated; 5) land area for hotels and tourist activities will increase by 134 per cent, and for commercial activities, it will increase to 168 square kilometres; 6) land area for education and health facilities will increase by 25 per cent; and 7) the length of public beaches will increase by 400 per cent (UAE Government, 2022). Dubai introduced sustainability requirements for hotels in 2012 (Dubai Tourism, 2021b; Lootah, 2022).

4.3.2 Morocco and Marrakech

The *Morocco Sustainable Tourism Charter* was introduced in 2016 and is based on four principles: 1. Environmental and biodiversity protection; 2. Culture and heritage perpetuation; 3. Prioritisation of local development and respect of host communities; and 4. Adoption of the principles of equity, ethics, and social responsibility.

The COP (Conference of Parties) 22 was held in Marrakech in 2016. From that event emerged the *Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action*.

Sustainable agriculture and farm-to-table initiatives in Morocco promote local food production and consumption which reduces the carbon footprint associated with food transportation. Farm-to-table initiatives in Morocco support small-scale farmers and local businesses, helping to boost the local economy (Mahmud et al., 2020).

4.3.3 Saudi Arabia and Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 sets ambitious targets for tourism, including becoming 10% of the Kingdom's GDP. There are several major tourism development plans, some called "giga projects", including for AlUla (Figure 35.4), Amaala, Diriyah Gate, Green Riyadh, NEOM, Qiddiya, Soudah, and the Red Sea (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022). The protection and restoration of historic mosques is also envisaged in the plans. Sustainable tourism is at the core of several of these projects and some observers are predicting that the Kingdom is destined to become a major sustainable tourism destination (Pethybridge, 2021). For example, the AlUla project's first objective is "developing AlUla as a living museum and a global destination for history, heritage, culture and ecotourism with an emphasis on sustainability and community-inclusivity, offering visitors an immersive and responsible experience".



Source: *Unsplash.com, Datingscout*

Figure 35.4 AlUla scenery in Saudi Arabia

Green Riyadh is one of the 2030 Vision projects. Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, aspires to become a sustainable city (Katar, 2022).

4.3.4 Jordan and Amman

In 2020, Jordan released the *Tourism sector: Green Growth National Action Plan 2021-2025*. The plan has five main objectives: 1. Enhance natural capital; 2. Sustainable economic growth; 3. Social development and poverty reduction; 4. Resource efficiency; and 5. Climate change adaptation and mitigation (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Ministry of Environment, 2020).

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has implemented several projects in Jordan related to sustainable tourism, one of which was *the Building Economic Sustainability through Tourism (BEST) Project* (USAID Jordan, 2015).

A study involving interviews with 14 subjects found that “Jordan’s public sector managers show a better understanding of the concept of sustainability and have tried to apply it in accordance with the specific field of their organization and limits of their management” (Allan and Allahham, 2021, p. 77).

The 650-km Jordan Trail, extending from Um Qais in the north to Aqaba in the south, was developed with a focus on sustainability, using local resources and creating opportunities for local communities (Jordan Trail, 2023). Tourists can stay in eco-lodges along the trail, eat local food, and participate in community-based tourism activities.

The city of Amman is working with several international agencies to improve its sustainability, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank Group. The World Bank is participating with Amman in its *Sustainable Cities Initiative*; while Amman commenced its *Green Cities Action Plan* process with EBRD in 2018 (EBRD Green Cities, 2023).

The Wild Jordan Center, owned by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) and located in Amman, generates income for the rural communities of the eight reserves in Jordan protected by RSCN by exhibiting and selling the various items they produced. The Center offers custom-made eco-tours at the various reserves in addition to hosting musical and cultural events (Wild Jordan Center, 2023).

4.3.5 Türkiye and Istanbul

In 2022, Türkiye started developing a *National Sustainable Tourism Program* with the help of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC, 2022). This made the country the very first in the world to adopt a mandatory national programme of this type, according to GSTC. The Istanbul Environment Friendly City Award was as a result of COP 19. The city itself has made major strides to become “smarter”, including introducing a new bus rapid transit system (Metrobüs) and making public spaces more pedestrian.

Enerjisa Enerji (Türkiye’s leading electricity company), Sabancı University, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) collaborated on a project aimed at promoting sustainability in tourism businesses in Küçükköy, along the Aegean coast. The project involves developing a “green destination model” and piloting efforts to infuse sustainable practices such as energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy into local tourism businesses, with the aim of setting an example for the rest of the region (Conexio Consulting, 2018).

The Stay is Türkiye's first carbon-neutral hotel, located in the heart of Istanbul on the

Bosphorus. The hotel's construction utilised repurposed abandoned houses and its entire fleet of vehicles were replaced with electric versions. To offset its carbon footprint, the hotel has established partnerships with local projects that support renewable energy and reforestation efforts. *The Stay* offers guests a luxurious experience that is also environmentally conscious, with eco-friendly amenities and organic food options (The Stay, 2023).

4.3.6 Oman and Muscat

Oman's economic development plan, *Oman Vision 2040*, is designed to diversify the country's economic portfolio beyond the production of oil, and the expansion of tourism is one of the priorities (Omran Group, 2023a). Oman has received several awards for its sustainability efforts, including as being ranked first in the GCC for sustainable tourism (Muscat Daily, 2021). The Sultanate holds the Oman Sustainability Week on an annual basis. Yiti, a sustainable city being developed by the Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran) - the government's tourism development and investment company – is designed to minimise its impact on the environment while providing an immersive experience for tourists. The city is being built with eco-friendly materials and techniques to harmoniously blend with the surrounding natural environment. The city also promotes sustainable practices such as reducing waste and using renewable energy sources. The project aims to preserve the unique flora and fauna of the region, and to protect the local ecosystem (Muscat Daily, 2022; Omran Group, 2021).

In terms of the well-being of the local community, Omran's *Farming for Hospitality* program empowers farmers to become suppliers for major tourism developments. The program provides farmers with greenhouses as well as training on crop selection to ensure that farmers directly meet the needs of neighbouring resorts. As a result, hotel guests can enjoy fresh and locally grown produce, while farmers benefit from a stable market and increased income (Omran Group, 2023b).

4.3.7 Qatar and Doha

The sustainable development of Qatar has a focus on the heritage of the Qatari nation and people. In line with the *2030 Qatar National Vision*, the Msheireb Downtown Doha project was developed by Msheireb properties, a subsidiary of the Qatar Foundation (Al-Hammadi, 2022). The project includes the Msheireb Museum that is housed in four restored traditional homes.

The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 stadiums were designed with energy efficiency and sustainability in mind, featuring state-of-the-art technologies that reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions. For example, the Al Janoub Stadium features a retractable roof that provides shade to the pitch and seating areas, reducing the need for air conditioning. Additionally, the Al Wakrah Stadium features a large solar-powered energy plant that will provide renewable energy to the stadium and the surrounding area (Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, 2022b).

Al-Wakrah, a city located along the coast of Qatar, is a great example for community-based tourism. The city offers a variety of attractions to tourists, including the historic Al-Wakrah Souq, fishing harbour, and Al-Wakrah Museum. The local community is actively involved in organising tours, providing accommodation and food, and showcasing their traditional crafts and arts. The positive impact of community-based tourism in Al-Wakrah is not only economic, but also includes preserving the city's cultural heritage and natural environment (Alfaraidy and Furlan, 2017).

4.3.8 UAE and Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (ADSW) is “a global platform for accelerating the world’s sustainable development” (ADSW, 2023). With respect to social-cultural sustainability, the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism (2023) has introduced the concept of *Authentic Emirati Experiences*, which include “everything from enjoying an Emirati meal prepared lovingly by Emiratis themselves or visit a local Emirati ranch in the desert”.

4.3.9 Egypt, Cairo, and Sharm El-Sheikh

Egypt performs very well on several tourism sustainability indicators according to the global rankings prepared by the World Economic Forum (Mohamed, 2022). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is assisting Egypt with its furthering of sustainable tourism (Mohamed, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

Egypt has launched the *Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS): Egypt Vision 2030* that contains many planned sustainable tourism initiatives (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, 2016). These include encouraging green tourism and protecting and maintaining heritage, and others.

USAID has provided considerable assistance to tourism in Egypt for many years. Its current project, *Integrated Management of Cultural Tourism*, has a focus on Historic Cairo and Luxor (USAID Egypt, 2022). According to the agency, it is partnering “with the Government of Egypt to streamline laws and regulations and develop public private partnership models that incentivize private sector investment in cultural tourism”.

Sharm El-Sheikh was selected as the venue for the COP 27 Climate Change Conference in 2022.

The Green Star Hotel Program, launched by the Egyptian tourism ministry and managed by the Egyptian Hotel Association, is the Middle East's first national eco-certification program for tourism aiming to encourage hotels to adopt sustainable tourism practices (Green Star Hotel, 2023). The program, which was recognised by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, has granted the certification to 158 hotels in 17 destinations throughout Egypt.

The *ECO EGYPT Experiences* campaign, launched by the Egyptian environment and tourism ministries, encourages sustainable tourism and supports local communities by showcasing their unique practices, traditions, and crafts (ECO EGYPT Experiences, 2023). The campaign’s website includes a green List of eco-labelled hotels, ecolodges, Green Fins-certified diving centres, and eco-friendly products. El Gouna, a privately developed resort town north of Hurghada, is the first place in Africa and the Arab region to receive the UN-sponsored Global Green Town award in 2014. It also served as the pilot location for the Green Star Hotel Initiative. El Gouna has adopted a zero-waste system, with more than 85% of its waste being reused and recycled through its wastewater treatment plant as well as its recycling and solid waste treatment plant. It also sources 40% of its food locally (Morton, 2022).

The choice of these nine countries from among the 20 in MENA should not be taken as implying that the 11 others are not involved in sustainable tourism. For example, GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH) is working with the Ministry of Tourism and others on the project, *Promotion of Sustainable Tourism in Tunisia*

(GIZ, 2021). Swisscontact has a sustainable tourism project in Tunisia as well. Also, the European Union is working with the Iranian government on sustainable tourism projects in the *Promoting Responsible Tourism for Heritage Protection and Sustainable Development* initiative. USAID has assisted Lebanon with sustainable tourism.

A feature that cannot be missed in this chapter is the development of new cities with strong sustainable and ecological features. This movement is especially strong in GCC countries as highlighted in the following section.

5. New sustainable city developments

Some of the MENA countries are constructing sustainable or eco cities and five of these projects are now reviewed.

5.1 NEOM, Saudi Arabia

NEOM is a planned smart city in the north-west of Saudi Arabia. The developers say that “From the revolutionary urban design of one of our flagship projects THE LINE – with no pollution and no traffic – to the regenerated and rewilded natural wilderness. It will be a destination like no other, enthralling and enticing the world’s travellers” (NEOM, 2023).

5.2 Masdar, UAE

“As one of the world’s most sustainable urban developments and the only planned and approved R&D cluster in Abu Dhabi, Masdar City is pioneering research and development in sustainability. The City is home to over 900 companies, dedicated to developing innovative technologies across the sectors of renewables, energy storage, artificial intelligence, health, space, and mobility” (Masdar City, 2022). Randeree and Ahmed (2019, p. 138) conducted a qualitative case study on the effects of the Masdar City development. They concluded that the project demonstrated innovation in environmental and economic sustainability, although it needed to give “greater consideration for the social imperative”.

5.3 Yiti, Oman

The Omran Group, Oman’s tourism development company, is coordinating the development of the Yeti project in Muscat. It is billed as a sustainable tourism city and occupies 100 hectares (Rogers, 2022; The Sustainable City – Yiti, 2023). Diamond Developers, a private sector company, is conducting the project as they are for The Sustainable City Dubai.

5.4 Other projects (XZero City, Kuwait; The Sustainable City Dubai, UAE)

The term “new cities” has several interpretations here. They are often parts of existing cities and can be projects of development companies, either state-run or private sector. They vary in size, scale, and complexity; for example, NEOM is the most expansive and is being coordinated by government. Masdar and Yiti are also government inspired projects. XZero City (TTN, 2022) and The Sustainable City Dubai (Diamond Developers, 2023) are private development company ventures with the construction and sales of residences and other real estate at their core.

6. Stakeholder involvement

The evidence presented in this chapter indicates that government bodies are steering most of the sustainable development and sustainable tourism initiatives in the MENA region. They are accomplishing this through the articulation of long-term visions and policies, and with

assistance from international agencies and NGOs in some cases. The strategic involvement of other stakeholders appears to be minimal and dependent on the directions supplied by the public sector. There is a need to involve local residents and tourism businesses to a higher degree in the future.

A specific issue of concern in this region is the involvement of women and girls in tourism. This was the topic for a special UNWTO report published in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). One of the major findings of this report was that women comprise only 8% of the tourism labour force in the Middle East compared to 54% globally. The statement is made that, “Whereas tourism is a sector comprised of a higher proportion of women than men around the world, in the Middle East it is a significantly male-dominated one” (UNWTO, 2020, p. 9). This does not mean that there is not an awareness of this issue in the MENA countries. For example, for Egypt the government, along with UNDP, has a strategic goal to “empower women and girls” as part of a broader social inclusion effort (United Nations Development Programme in Egypt, 2022).

Having described the status of sustainable tourism in the region as a whole and in specific countries and cities, as well as stakeholder involvement, the next section looks at future prospects.

7. Future prospects for sustainable tourism in the MENA region

Many of the current forecasts for tourism in MENA are positive and the UNWTO (2023) has indicated that the region rebounded from the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic better than any other region (UNWTO, 2023). The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) (2022) is one of several sources projecting the expansion of tourism in the next ten years in the MENA region. WTTC expects that Travel & Tourism GDP will grow at an annual rate of 7.7% from 2022 to 2032, creating 3.6 million new tourism jobs in the region. It is expected that sustainable tourism will be a priority amidst this robust sectoral growth.

Several countries have ambitious tourism development plans that will fuel tourism growth. These are embedded in national visions to diversify economic activities. Saudi Arabia has perhaps the most aggressive future plans for the expansion of tourism. The Kingdom plans to become a more visited international tourism destination according to its *Vision 2030* (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022) that was discussed earlier in the chapter. Saudi Arabia has the target of hosting 100 million visitors by 2030 (Nair, 2022). These developments have the potential of significantly shifting the landscape of tourism in the region.

There is much evidence, as demonstrated in this chapter, that many MENA countries are placing greater emphasis on sustainable tourism after the global pandemic. For the region to be more widely perceived as a sustainable tourism destination, improvements in marketing will be required as well as an expansion and greater professionalisation of destination management organisations (DMOs). Cross-border marketing and sustainability standards will also have a significant impact on awareness-building and driving greater visit intentions. There is a need for a much greater emphasis in academic research in the future on sustainable tourism and tourism in general in the MENA region. MENA is not being given as much scholarly attention as other parts of the world, yet its tourism opportunities and complex issues surely deserve more investigation. Research on how emerging technologies such as AI, augmented and virtual reality, and the metaverse can be applied to increase awareness and visits should be among the new scholarly research efforts. Also, the implementation of all

aspects of smart tourism in urban areas requires greater research attention, as does the role of women in tourism. The expansion of the concept of desert tourism is needed, as are ways to expand growth in the number of cross-border trails and themed tourist circuits.

8. Conclusions

The MENA region is an exciting and unique tourism destination that offers a great variety of activities and experiences. The countries themselves are very different from one another. It is home to several of the most sacred sites for Muslims, Christians, and Jews and has multiple precious heritage and cultural sites and resources, many of which are on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Despite its magnificent resources and excellent access, the MENA region attracts a relatively small share of global tourist arrivals, when compared to Europe, Asia-Pacific, and the Americas. Outside of the world-renowned destinations, including Egypt and Dubai, there appears to be a lack of awareness of the principal attractions in many of the MENA countries and cities, and this must be rectified in future.

There are major challenges to sustainable development and sustainable tourism in the MENA region. Some of the MENA countries suffer from severe developmental challenges including drought, hunger, and poverty. Geopolitical instability is an ongoing issue that tarnishes the image of several of these countries as tourism destinations. Perceptions of the lack of safety and security persist for several countries and inhibit the healthy growth of tourism.

All MENA countries are involved to an extent in sustainable tourism, with some being more advanced than others (e.g., Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye). Robust growth in tourism in the MENA region is being forecasted by credible sources and an enhanced priority on sustainability is expected in the years to come. Sustainable urban tourism as a concept is steadily emerging in MENA countries after the national-level policies and priorities have been articulated.

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