

# The Rise of Islamic Tourism

## International conference discusses effect of 9/ 11 on Arab tourism

London- Karen Dabrowska

The BRISMES (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies) annual conference was held at the London Middle East Institute at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. It was addressed by Gunter Meyer of the Centre for Research on the Arab World (CERAW) at the University of Mainz (Germany) who pointed out that September 11 and the "war against terror" caused dramatic changes in the flow of tourists into and out of Arab countries. Some Arab tourist destinations are suffering from a massive decline in the number of tourist arrivals while others are benefiting from a tremendous surge in holiday makers. The information on these new trends in international tourism is extremely scanty. Nevertheless, all Arab countries are at present promoting the expansion of the tourist sector in an unprecedented manner. Even some GCC countries, which rejected any form of international tourism in the past, have started to develop new projects for attracting tourists from all over the world and from Muslim countries in particular. Tens of billions of dollars are being invested in the UAE alone to raise the number of tourist arrivals to 15 million people in 2010. Other Arab countries have similar plans.

All these schemes rely only on rough estimates about the future development of tourism without hardly any empirical studies or a sound data base on the latest changes in Arab tourism and the sustainability of these trends. That is why the Centre for Research on the Arab World (CERAW) at the University of Mainz (Germany) has started to establish an interdisciplinary and international network consisting of numerous research institutions and individual scholars engaged in the study of themes related to the flow of tourists into the Arab world and out of it. CERAW is co-ordinating various research projects on Arab tourism involving such disciplines as anthropology, intercultural studies, economic studies, gender studies, geography, media studies, political sciences, religious studies and sociology.

Dr Ala Al-Hamarneh spoke about Islamic Tourism – a new strategy of tourist industries in the Arab World. He told the conference that the notion of Islamic Tourism includes three major concepts – an economic ➤



Mr. Christian Steiner

السيد كرسيتيان شتاينر.



Dr. Ala Al-Hamarnah. الدكتور علاء الحمارنة.

concept which aims at increasing tourism between Muslim countries, developing new tourist destinations and strengthening the institutional and governmental co-operation inside the Muslim world; a cultural concept focusing on Islamic topics in the organisation of tourist programmes and offering more places of Islamic heritage to be visited by Muslim tourists. Religious tourism and "touristic" interpretations of pilgrimage belong to this concept as well; and – a conservative religious concept aiming at the adjustment of the tourist industries to the fundamental interpretations of Islam including gender-segregated and alcohol-free tourism as well as "Islamic" financed and organised tourism. An "Islamic community tourism" is envisaged.

Discussions about the forms and goals of Islamic tourism had just started when the terrorists attacked New York and Washington. The predicted collapse of the tourism industry in Arab countries after 9/11 did not take place, but the global flow of tourists changed dramatically: The number of visitors from North America, Europe and Japan declined in the Arab world whereas Arab tourists spent their holidays mainly in

Arab and other Muslim countries. Lebanon, Syria, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt benefitted from the shift in tourist flows. Shortly after 9/11 these countries were able to stabilise their tourist industries and achieved significant growth during the last two tourist seasons.

Beyond economic stabilisation and growth, a drift towards a decline of the role of cultural tourism has been noticed. The "traditional" cultural tourist destinations, which were highly popular among European and American visitors, were in most cases not regarded as attractive by the average Arab tourist. This resulted in a still ongoing re-organisation of tourist facilities in order to adjust to the demands of a growing flow of Arab and Muslim tourists. The co-operation in tourism policies among Arab states and between Arab and Muslim countries reached unprecedented dimensions: the Islamic Conference for the Ministers of Tourism has been gathering regularly since 2000 and the first Arab World and tourism Exchange in Beirut in 2003 became an enormous success.

The conference was also addressed by Christian Steiner who spoke about the strategies of trans-national companies in the Egyptian Tourist Sector after 9/11 and Andrea von Sarnowski who described how the small-scale tourist sector of South Sinai was coping with crises.

Steiner noted that in the last two decades the Egyptian tourist sector has expanded rapidly. The main growth areas of tourism are located in the leisure and water-sports oriented regions on the Red Sea coast and along the Sinai Riviera. The landscape of vast coastal areas became dominated by luxurious hotels and resorts attracting international tourism. After 9/11 however the number of tourists from western countries decreased dramatically and has not yet recovered. A significant shift in the structure of tourist flows – less tourists from western countries and an increasing number of Arab tourists – is noticeable.

Andrea von Sarnowski described the tourist boom in the Sinai which the Egyptian government has promoted as a major tourist venue. The emphasis has been placed on the development of Sharm Al Sheikh, Dahab



الآنسة أندريا فون سارنوسكي.

Miss Andrea von Sarnowski

and Nuweiba. In the past Dahab and Nuweiba have attracted back packers and individual tourists but there are plans to upgrade these resorts.

The major attractions in the area are St Catherines – a Greek Orthodox Monastery dating back to the 6th century and Mt Sinai – a holy place for Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Migrants to the Sinai dream of establishing their own hotels after working in other hotels in menial jobs. The area is the traditional home of the Bedouins but they now only make up 25 percent of the population due to increasing migration. Today most of the Bedouins live in houses and 90 percent are self employed in individual tourism, the safari business or transport between different towns. They also manage cafeterias or sell handicrafts to safari tourists.

The participation of the Bedouins in the tourist industry is limited as the government is focusing on the luxury end of the market and they are competing for jobs in the with immigrants. ■