

Chapter Twelve: Marketing the Middle East in Times of Political Instability – The Case of Jordan

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Introduction

Since December 2010, perceptions of tourism risk in the Middle East have been dominated by the spread of political instability which has affected many countries in the region. This chapter will focus on Jordan which has experienced episodes of political instability inherent in the widespread Arab uprisings. However, by comparison with its contiguous neighbours Iraq, Syria and to a lesser extent Israel and its near neighbour Egypt, the extent of political violence in Jordan has been relatively low. Nevertheless, Jordan's tourism statistics reveal the number of international tourism arrivals since 2011 has been affected mostly by the perception of instability and outbreaks of politically and religiously motivated violence in neighbouring Arab countries, notably Syria, Iraq and Egypt (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016). The political violence in Syria, to Jordan's North, and Iraq to Jordan's east has contributed to shaping a largely inaccurate perception that Jordan is an unsafe destination.

This chapter commences with a detailed discussion of the current political crisis in a number of Middle Eastern countries and the impact that this is having on Jordan's tourism industry. Reasons as to why Jordan, despite having no direct involvement in the instability that surrounds it, is experiencing a significant downturn in international tourism are proposed with research led insights as to why tourists are choosing to avoid the destination. A number of destination management and marketing strategies are recommended for Jordan's struggling tourism sector and other Middle Eastern destinations whose tourism trade may be affected by political instability.

The Arab Uprisings 2010-2016

In December 2010, Tunisia was the first of many countries in the Arab world including Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen to experience mass civil demonstrations which demanded the overthrow of established regimes. The demonstrations, which mutated to popular uprisings were initially referred to as the *Arab Spring*, largely due to the fact that many of the activists involved in

leading anti-regime demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt were young, educated people calling for democratisation of their national governments (Markham, 2014). However, as political unrest spread throughout the Middle East during 2011, and continues to this day, the political elements dominating these anti-government protests have increasingly been dominated by Jihadist groups which seek to impose their specific brand of Islamic observance and Sharia law on the populace (Lutterbeck, 2013). The youthful and largely secular intelligentsia who dominated the early days of the uprisings, especially in Egypt and Tunisia, were effective social media communicators but lacked a substantial political support base outside the main cities. They also lacked any reliable and substantial source of funding, backing of a structured membership organisation or a political party. Conversely, the jihadist groups, were well organised, linked to structured political organisations, often included armed militias and had access to reliable sources of funds. They were ideologically tapped into the more religious, conservative mindset of regional and rural populations (Bayat, 2013).

By 2013 it became clear that the term *Arab Spring* was an inappropriate label to describe the political morass into which Egypt, Libya, Iraq and Syria had descended (Markham, 2014). Long entrenched political regimes including that led by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdulla Saleh in Yemen, Muammar Ghaddafi in Libya were all overthrown between early 2011-2012. In Egypt, the army which had been the mainstay of Mubarak's political control between 1981-2011, supported his overthrow in 2011. In turn during 2013, the Egyptian army ousted the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi, elected in 2012 and replaced it with an interim military government run by Abdul Fattah El Sisi. This government became entrenched when Sisi was elected in presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014 (an election boycotted by the ousted Muslim Brotherhood) (Dandashly, 2015). Many other Arab countries from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east experienced mass protests from 2010-2016. In Syria, Iraq, Libya, and to a limited extent in Egyptian Sinai, a state of civil war now exists involving militias which engage in combat with each other and the official regime for power. This has been complicated by the involvement of the Sunni dominated Islamic State (ISIS) which occupies significant bands of territory in both Syria and Iraq (Gelvin, 2015).

Political Unrest in the Middle East and Jordan's Tourism Industry

The dominant image of the Middle East since 2011 has been one of a region beset by political instability and violence. As tourists are increasingly opting for safety and stability as a primary attribute of preferred tourism destinations, many countries in the Middle East, with the notable exceptions of Oman and the United Arab Emirates (especially Dubai, Abu Dhabi) have experienced declines in tourist arrivals since 2011 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014).

In the past, a considerable portion of wholesale tourism product to Jordan, especially from Western countries involved linkages between Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Israel. Consequently, when the security situation in Egypt and Syria began to deteriorate from 2011, many tourists, especially Europeans and North Americans who were planning itineraries which combined travel to either or both Egypt and Syria either cancelled or deferred their travel plans. While many Christian groups continued to undertake pilgrimage tours combining Israel and Jordan, this market also suffered due to negative perceptions of Jordan, largely stemming from its proximity to the civil wars raging in Syria and Iraq. Unrest in Israel due to ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians exacerbated negative sentiment (Mansfeld & Korman, 2015; Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Some Christian pilgrimage groups are concerned that the persecution and murder of Christians by ISIS and other Jihadist groups represents a potential danger to them in a predominantly Islamic country like Jordan (S. Green, personal communication, January 8, 2016). Jordan has therefore been increasingly obliged to market itself in isolation, as a stand-alone tourism destination. In fact a core element of Jordan's tourism strategy since 2011 has been to enhance the marketing of destination Jordan to the Islamic world as a core strategy to compensate for the decline in tourism arrivals (traditionally dominated by Christian pilgrims) from Europe and North America.

Jordan's Key Tourism Products: Promotional Initiatives and Challenges 2011-2016

Jordan's location on the Hejaz route between The Muslim holy sites of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia and the predominantly Muslim states of Iraq, Syria and Turkey places it at the geographical epicentre of the Arab world. Jordan's Royal family (The Hashemites) have been the traditional guardians of the Hejaz route and a number of Islamic Holy sites including the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The national carrier, Royal Jordanian airlines offers excellent air links between Jordan and all major Islamic states.

The wide reporting of a million Syrian and Iraqi refugees taking refuge in Jordan (UNHCR, 2016) raises concerns (however unjustified) that the conflicts in Syria and Iraq could spill over into Jordan. According to the UN High Commission on Refugees, the vast majority of refugees residing in camps in Jordan are in camps located close to the Syrian or Iraqi border. Most tourists to Jordan tend to focus their tour programs in Western and Southern Jordan. The classical Jordan tourist itinerary tends to stretch as far north as Jerash, include Amman and hug the border with Israel to include Petra, Madaba, Mt Nebo, Wadi Rum, the Dead Sea and Aqaba on Jordan's sliver of Red Sea coast. The overwhelming majority of tourists to Jordan who take this route are unlikely to encounter refugees from Iraq or Syria's civil wars.

Figure 1 Tourism Map of Jordan. The Holy land = Israel



While Jordan is home to the ancient city of Petra, (elected in 2007 by an UNESCO poll as one of the seven wonders of the world) and a further 28,000 archaeological sites (Al Haija, 2011), these attributes alone are not enough to attract and retain the visitation levels previously experienced by Jordan when packaged with neighbouring countries (Jordan Ministry of Tourism, 2013). Prior to the outbreak of regional instability since 2011, Jordan was reliant on complementing its own attractions with those of Egypt and Syria for its tourism success. In the current political climate, it is in Jordan's best interests to disassociate itself as a tourist destination from these countries. However, this may be easier said than done however due to the tourists' exposure to media commentary that often regionalises the location of crises as opposed to making direct references to the specific countries involved (Walters & Clulow, 2010). In this case, the media's reference to the Middle East as opposed to Syria for example inevitably causes confusion among the tourism market regarding the precise geographic location of the crises.

Those responsible for marketing Jordan continue to try and determine the best way to communicate with the tourism market and bring tourists back to Jordan. Jordan has employed a strategy of highlighting the diversity of tourism experiences in the country such as promoting new types of tourism with a focus on eco-tourism or health tourism centred on Jordan's Dead Sea Coast. Recovery campaigns which include reductions on tax imposed on tourism have been employed by Jordan's tourism industry but the political unrest in the Middle East continues to create new challenges for marketers (Avraham, 2015).

Why tourists are avoiding Jordan

Technically speaking, the media's failure to use specific terms of reference when reporting on crises leads to what is described as a generalisation effect (Beirman, 2003). Generalisation occurs when the lack of geographical knowledge about foreign destinations that are experiencing some form of crises blurs the perception of danger in a person's mind. Thus crises affecting one country consequently deter people from travelling to neighbouring countries regardless of the country's actual involvement (Beirman, 2003; Cavlek, 2002; Steiner, 2007). The generalisation effect is a recurrent consequence of political crises. These effects are commonly seen between countries that share cultural similarities (Clements & Georgiou, 1998) and/or geographical borders with countries perceived to be unstable (Beirman, 2003). Various conflicts such as the Iraq War, the war against Al-Qaeda and more recently the Arab uprising (Avraham, 2015;

Steiner, 2007) have spread a common misunderstanding among tourists that the entire Middle East is dangerous and unstable. While Jordan has not been immune from internal political protest since 2011, by comparison with three of its four Arab neighbours, Iraq, Syria and Egypt, the extent and depth of political unrest in Jordan has been relatively modest. Unfortunately however, the political instability that surrounds Jordan would be having a significant impact on the tourist's risk perception and their belief that the destination would be able to provide a safe and secure holiday (Sharifpour, Walters, Ritchie & Winter, 2013).

In addition to the region's less than favourable political climate, the Middle East is generally perceived by westerners as a risky region to visit owing to its cultural dissimilarities (Lepp & Gibson, 2008). The region also remains a Muslim state, in which the lives of women are perceived by westerners as restricted and there is little compatibility between the needs of the hedonistic westernised tourist and Islamic way of life (Henderson, 2006). Similarly, consumers from Arabic countries such as Saudi Arabia are more likely to avoid western countries because of significantly different social structure and dissimilar language (Yavas, 1987). There is hence a broad range of risks that need to be considered, not only by the individual traveller but also by those responsible for promoting Jordan to western markets.

As a result of the political instability and disruption occurring in the Middle East, Jordan is in need of a repositioning strategy that will achieve two objectives. The first objective is to promote the country as a safe and relatively low risk destination. The second is to convince their target markets that Jordan has a sufficient diversity and quality of tourism product worthy of mono destination long haul travel. It is important to recognise however that at the current time, the Jordanian government allocates a high percentage of financial resources to heightening security measures and unlike many of its resource rich Middle Eastern neighbours, Jordan has a high reliance on foreign aid (Jordan Economy Profile, 2014). Tourism related funding for the marketing of the destination and collection of market related data, despite the importance of tourism to the local economy, is therefore limited. These challenges faced by the Jordanian tourism industry are addressed below via a series of recommendations as to how they may be managed.

Recommendations for Marketing Jordan as a Tourism Destination

Branding destinations that are perceived as risky is difficult. Tourism managers responsible for the promotion of risky destinations need to understand the potential tourist's psychological evaluation of the destination in terms of the imminent risk they perceive in order to mitigate concerns and encourage visitation. Below is a series of strategies that may assist the region's primary tourism destinations to regain a favourable brand position in the global tourism market place.

(1) Motivate and Collaborate

An internal marketing campaign likely to motivate and or educate stakeholders on the importance of being pro-active in times of crisis and take ownership of the problem could of generate a collaborative response to the issue. Some examples include:

- a. A platform for the sharing of market intelligence - i.e. generated via social media commentary and global media reports that provide a good indication of the kinds of perceptions that are being created and where, could provide a collective representation of what concerns exist among the global tourism market and those that need to be addressed through targeted marketing communications.
- b. Jordan constitutes a very fragmented industry and representation from all regions and districts is needed. The sharing and reporting of key issues facing the industry such as visitation levels, tourist feedback, infrastructural issues, safety and security breaches, rogue operators and other relevant incidences is essential for Jordan's governing tourism authorities if they are to succeed in taking a holistic approach to the management of these issues and reinforce the safety and security status of Jordan to the outside world.
- c. Regular seminars and workshops for the dissemination and sharing of industry initiatives and case studies that demonstrate best practice in crisis management and response should also be made available to tourism stakeholders. Such examples could come from operators who are taking leadership in this space or have market information worthy of sharing.

(2) Delegate and Communicate

In order to encourage ownership of the image associated issues shared by the industry and its counterparts, operators need to be educated and informed of the significant difference the

destination will be able to make in terms of marketing and destination image enhancement should everyone play a role. In addition, from a policy and planning perspective, the roles and responsibilities of senior officials and their agencies need to be clearly defined and communicated so everyone is clear who is responsible for which task. Should risk mitigation not be included in these publicly defined roles, then it needs to be made clear to the private sector that they need to play a role themselves. The initiatives undertaken by the private sector would need to be orchestrated in such a way that they remain consistent with the destination's overarching brand image and positioning strategy. Table 1 presents some examples of the kinds of tasks that could be delegated to the private sector and those that should be addressed at a government and destination management level.

Table 1 Suggested Roles and Responsibilities for the Enhancement of Jordan's Perceived Image

G o v e r n m e n t L e v e l	D e s t i n a t i o n M a n a g e m e n t O r g a n i s a t i o n / s	P r i v a t e S e c t o r
Reinforcing safety status and economic dependence on tourism to diplomatic partners	Ensuring that all marketing and promotional activity includes factual information relating to the safety and security measures the destination has in place to minimise risk perceptions and ease market confusion around mixed messages disseminated from the media and other sources.	Enhance collaborative efforts both regionally and nationally and work together across the sectors (accommodation, food & beverage and attractions) to educate the market on the actions they take to minimise any risks the visitors are likely to be concerned about.
Creating awareness of implications of Government Travel Warnings in Source Markets	Monitor government and mass media reporting that refers to the Middle East and maintain website information to mitigate such messages.	Operators should maintain a positive social media presence and update this constantly with images, testimonials and any other material that is likely to

		dispel unnecessary risk associations.
Raising awareness of the impacts of global media reporting on the destination image	Incentivise the private sector to become pro-active in prepare for and responding to negative press. For example; public acknowledgement and recognition, linking noteworthy rises in visitation with relevant industry activities (i.e. social media monitoring, collaborative marketing efforts) to show cause and effect.	Operators need to take responsibility for the monitoring of social media commentary directly relevant to their site, region, business and act accordingly.
Once a desirable brand image is established – be instrumental in communicating this through logo's, symbols and icons in all correspondence.	Be a voice for the industry in terms of media management. Liaise with or formally communicate with global media managers or global media watchdog organisations to control misleading media reports and encourage reporting that aligns with and supports Jordan's 'safe' position.	There is an opportunity for operators to generate newsworthy publicity about special occasions or events in their area that can be shared by mainstream or social media and may possibly distract public attention from the negative.
Ensuring that all safety and border protection measures are communicated to diplomatic partners in source markets as well as any other relevant laws, policies and regulations likely to be seen as	Monitor marketing efforts of members of the private sector to ensure they are consistent with the national brand message (whatever this might be). Providing access to logo's, templates and the internal promotion of the desired brand	Share any relevant feedback relating to public perceptions relating to security and safety issues with the broader industry so the perceptions may be countered at both an individual and a

enhancing the safety of and security of the destination.	image to all industry stakeholders may assist with this.	collaborative (industry) level.
	Embrace digital and social media vehicles as both a means of promotion and a means of gathering marketing intelligence relating to risk perceptions through constant monitoring of content from past, present and future consumer.	Provision of fact driven and reliable information to travel intermediaries in source markets so they too have the appropriate tools to overcome common concerns held by tourists who may be considering a trip to Jordan.

(3) Encourage financial support for marketing activities from the private sector

Fund raising is an issue for almost all regional and national tourism associations but in light of the fact that Jordan's limited public sector funding for destination promotion there is an opportunity to encourage financial contribution from the private sector. Examples include:

- a. Tourism Industry Accreditation Schemes: Operators pay a fee to become an accredited provider and or complete the relevant training through various professional development schemes that complement Jordan's core product offering and desired market position. Specific suggestions that align with Jordan's Tourism Labour Market Development Strategy include: these suggestions below could be relevant to business owners and employers.
 - (i) Safety and Security Affiliated Schemes – this would resonate well with Risk Averse Tourists
 - (ii) Sustainability and Environmental Accreditation Schemes (local)
 - (iii) Food safety and Hygiene Accreditation
 - (iv) Online booking protection
- b. National Tourism Awards: Entrants pay an entry fee and are rewarded with exposure, media coverage and if a winning entrant- certification and trophy for display at facility. Attendees also pay to attend the Awards function when it takes place. Judging can be

'people's choice' (i.e. tourists nominate and vote) or a panel of 'high profile' industry names and local celebrities can judge.

- c. Marketing buy-in to local, regional and national marketing campaigns and listings on websites.
- d. Donations of room nights, food and beverage and attraction entry to visiting travel trade and press (small investment for maximum exposure).
- e. Dinar for Dinar matching agreement between Jordan's Destination Management Organisations and Government – i.e. Tourism Industry is rewarded for its efforts to raise funds independently of aid and government.

These fund raising initiatives can only enhance the quality of the services and visitor experiences as accreditation and Tourism Awards schemes are renowned for doing.

Tourism awards also capture the attention of the media and promote the industry to the broader community.

(4) Access low cost market research

Finally, the Jordan National Tourism Strategy (2015) reinforces the importance of reliable market research, yet one must acknowledge the funding limitations faced by the industry. While the authors emphasise the importance of reliable marketing intelligence for decision making – particularly that relating to brand development, we propose some ideas as to how the Jordanian tourism industry may address their research related needs without having to invest too much of their limited marketing funds.

- a. Secondary data available online via social media commentary. We advocate the value of this freely accessible data that communicates great detail concerning the potential visitor's concerns.
- b. Accessing University students: Across the world there are 1000's of post graduate students studying tourism and academic institutions that are open to the opportunity to engage with industry and offer their students chance to work on a 'live' project. These students are generally methodologically qualified in a range of methods and techniques and are supervised by highly qualified academic staff. While Jordan tourism authorities might have to provide assistance with access to data, be on call to answer research

related questions and guide the student as to the industry's research needs – this is a small price to pay for the kind of research data the student could provide.

- c. Recruiting a fulltime research manager/assistant. University graduates who study higher degrees often search for research related positions where they can practice and apply their research based skills. For the cost of an annual salary, having such staff on board the tourism management team can work out to be a portion of consultancy related fees.
- d. Research training for existing staff – again having the expertise within the organisation is often less expensive than having to outsource this skill. Short courses in data collection and analysis run by industry professionals or academics could enable existing staff to collect and manage industry specific and market specific data.

The above recommendations emphasise the importance of collaboration, effective communication and information sharing and shared responsibility across the public and private sectors for the effective management and promotion of Jordan during times of crises. In addition, recommendations are made as to how Jordan's tourism industry can raise the funds needed to advise and implement their destination marketing strategies when public funding is limited as a result of Jordan's government having to allocate a high proportion of their budget to defence.

Conclusion

This chapter has spoken of the political crisis that is currently occurring across a number of Middle Eastern countries with specific focus on the impact that this unrest is having on the peaceful kingdom of Jordan. Tourists are avoiding Jordan as they are unable to perceptually separate Jordan from the hostile and high risk environments of its neighbouring countries. This, accompanied by the general risk perceptions that exist among western markets towards the Middle East presents significant marketing challenges for not only Jordan but potentially any destination that is affected by, but not directly involved in, political crises. Cooperation and collaboration is needed for the collation of relevant market intelligence and the development of a consistent marketing message to mitigate unfounded concerns and position Jordan as destination capable of offering a safe and rewarding tourism experience. Further studies in this area are needed to explore the strategies and responses implemented by other Middle Eastern countries and perhaps those outside of the Middle East who have in recent times been exposed to political crises. Such research would allow for the sharing of best practice

examples and facilitate the development of a globally relevant response strategy to an increasingly relevant issue.

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