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## Impacts of the Saudi Tourist Phenomenon on Turkey's Tourism Industry: Examples from Trabzon

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## Introduction

The tourism industry has been one of the most active sectors in the Republic of Turkey and has elevated the nation to the sixth most popular tourist destination in the world. The tourism business has been undergoing new trends in recent years in all countries due to technological developments, media interactivity, increased competition from most hosting countries, and economic and political changes. This study is important because there are many reasons why Turkey's successful tourism industry is an interesting case to study, including the nation's geographic location and climate, its ancient and modern history, the recent growth of the economy, and recent political developments.

Statistically, according to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in 2015, the number of arriving tourists in Turkey exceeded 39.4 million and total generated revenue was \$31.4 billion.<sup>1</sup> Although most tourists come from the European countries, other parts of the world are also represented, including the Middle East and the Arab countries, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

Such developments and the obvious increase in the number of Saudi tourists in Turkey, of course, indicate a stable, bilateral relationship between Turkey and the Kingdom. In addition, this can improve political ties and usher in more economic cooperation, especially in the short run, and possibly also in the long run. Moreover, this social interaction between the Saudis and the Turks can drive their countries to develop more business in the future, especially in the tourism industries and related sectors. In addition, this development can extend to the culture of both countries, with the result that more Turks learn

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(1) Investment Support and Promotion Agency, Tourism, <http://www.invest.gov.tr/en-US/sectors/Pages/WellnessAndTourism.aspx>.

(2) *Sabah*, "Arap turistin Türkiye'ye ilgisi artıyor" (Arab tourists are increasing their interest in Turkey), (Feb. 11, 2014), <http://www.sabah.com.tr/turizm/2014/02/11/arap-turistin-turkiyeye-ilgisi-artiyor>.

Arabic and more Saudis learn Turkish. It is notable that despite the fact that Turkey just survived a coup attempt in mid-2016 and took a different position regarding the Qatar crisis that may not be favorable to the Saudis, the number of tourists from the Kingdom seems to be increasing at a steady rate.

In recent years and especially from 2011 onward, Turkey started to receive huge numbers of tourists from the Middle East and the Arab countries. According to the *Daily Sabah*, 2.78 million Arab tourists visited Turkey in 2013, 2.50 million in 2014, and 2.95 million in 2015.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, tourists from Saudi Arabia alone constituted nearly half a million; this is the highest of all the Arab countries.<sup>4</sup> In the Saudi media, the topics of traveling and visiting Turkey were promoted by many parties wishing to promote tourism there. This phenomenon triggers many questions, which this paper attempts to answer, such as, How does the appearance of the phenomenon of the large influx of Saudi tourists impact tourism in Turkey? What possible political, economic, and cultural forces contribute to this phenomenon? Moreover, why has Trabzon emerged as a desirable destination for many Saudi tourists? Finally, how may the increase in Saudi tourists specifically impact socioeconomic conditions in Trabzon?

## **Literature Review**

Several researchers have investigated Saudi tourists' preferences, Turkey's success as a tourist destination, and other motivations and reasons that can support the tourism industry, including the effects of television series, culture, and religion. Alghamdi found that Saudis tend to be conservative, which shapes their tourist preferences.<sup>5</sup> Öter's research found that Turkey's

(3) *Daily Sabah* with Anadolu Agency, "Nearly Half a Million Saudi Tourists Visit Turkey Annually," Feb. 13, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/tourism/2017/02/14/nearly-half-a-million-saudi-tourists-visit-turkey-annually>.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Abdulraheem Alghamdi, "Explicit and Implicit Motivation towards Outbound Tourism: A Study of Saudi Tourists" (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2007), 89, <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/96/>.



geographic location and cultural heritage are among the reasons why some Saudi tourists choose Turkey as their first-choice destination.<sup>6</sup> Kantarci and colleagues examined television series and their influence on tourists; they found that Turkish TV series were one of the factors motivating Saudi tourists to prefer Turkey.<sup>7</sup> Yalcinalp and Mustafa Var's research examined Trabzon and found the city has a very strong potential for tourism due to its natural environment and local culture.<sup>8</sup>

The studies on this topic sought to examine the reasons why Turkey is such an important tourist destination and why, from the perspectives of both tourism and culture, Saudi tourists have come to prefer it. Moreover, this report focuses on the recent surge in tourism in Turkey and the phenomenon of the influx of Saudi tourists in Turkey, and specifically in Trabzon, subjects not covered in previous studies. Furthermore, there are other aspects crucial to this topic, such as recent developments in Turkey's internal and international politics and their possible influence on the tourism industry. Moreover, it is important to understand how the huge number of Saudi tourists in Turkey impacts the socioeconomic conditions and infrastructure of Turkey, and Trabzon in particular, a topic that includes real estate, aviation, and new trends in the economics of tourism.

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- (6) Zafer Öter, "Alternative Tourism Types between Turkey and GCC Countries: Towards a Regional Win-Win Strategy" (3rd Arab-Turkish Congress of Social Science, State, Justice and Youth, Istanbul University Convention Center, May 2013), 115, <https://goo.gl/S8k7TP>.
  - (7) Kemal Kantarci, Murat Alper Basaran, and Pasa Mustafa Ozyurt, "The Effect of Turkish TV Series on Inbound Tourism of Turkey: A Case of Saudi Arabia and Bulgaria" (International Scientific Conference, University of Niš, Faculty of Economics, October 16, 2015), 214, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309418785\\_Alternative\\_Tourism\\_Types\\_between\\_Turkey\\_and\\_GCC\\_States\\_Towards\\_a\\_Regional\\_Win-Win\\_Strategy\\_Korfez\\_ulkeleri\\_ye\\_Turkiye\\_arasynda\\_alternatif\\_turizm\\_turleri\\_bolgesel\\_kazan-kaan\\_stratejileri](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309418785_Alternative_Tourism_Types_between_Turkey_and_GCC_States_Towards_a_Regional_Win-Win_Strategy_Korfez_ulkeleri_ye_Turkiye_arasynda_alternatif_turizm_turleri_bolgesel_kazan-kaan_stratejileri).
  - (8) Emrah Yalcinalp and Mustafa Var, "The Effects of Natural and Cultural Degradations in Trabzon Karadag High Plateau-Tourism Center, Turkey, on Eco-Tourism Activities and Some Solution Proposals," *Regional and Urban Modeling*, EcoMod, <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:ekd:002836:283600106>.

## **The Uniqueness of Turkish Tourism and Preferences of Saudi Tourists**

Back in 1967, Turkey generated \$7 million from tourism, and by 1983, revenues from tourism had reached more than \$400 million.<sup>9</sup> After many years, Turkey came under new leadership with the ascendance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, which initiated the “2023 Vision of the Republic of Turkey.” According to this plan, by 2023 tourism in Turkey will generate \$50 billion and the number of annual visitors will reach 50 million.<sup>10</sup> The tourism sector’s development was dramatically accelerated, and billions of dollars in revenue were achieved in the years that followed. Turkey’s tourism industry is unique because of what it has to offer tourists, and particularly those from Saudi Arabia.

Turkey’s advantages as a tourist destination can be summed up in a few points: first, it has a strategic geographic location, being situated between Eastern Europe and the Middle East and surrounded by four seas, the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Marmara Sea, and Aegean Sea. Average flight time from Saudi Arabia to Ankara, Antalya, Istanbul, or Trabzon is four to five hours and all flights are direct. Second, Turkey enjoys a very long coastline, which exceeds 7,000 km, and has been ranked second of 38 countries due to its 436 Blue Flag beaches.<sup>11</sup> The beaches and the coastal climate also attract many Saudi tourists, especially those who live away from the sea at home. The third advantage is the four pleasant and diverse seasons and the moderate climate

(9) Mehmet Çetingüleş, “Türkiye’nin keşfi,” *Al-Monitor*, Temmuz 31, 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/contents/articles/originals/2014/07/cetingulec-turkey-tourism-revenues-arab-japanese-antalya.html>.

(10) *TurkishPress.com*, “Tourism Minister Gunay: 2023 Target Is to Host 50 Million Tourists,” March 30, 2008, <http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?id=223193>.

(11) Investment Support and Promotion Agency, “Tourism,” <http://www.invest.gov.tr/en-US/sectors/Pages/WellnessAndTourism.aspx>. The Blue Flag designation is awarded by the European Union’s Foundation for Environmental Education as a sign of excellent water quality. Also, for more details, you can check “Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry, Investment Support and Promotion Agency, Tourism Industry Report,” <http://www.invest.gov.tr/en-US/infocenter/publications/Documents/TOURISM-INDUSTRY.pdf>.

that Turkey enjoys year-round. Saudi tourists find the climate in Turkey very attractive compared to the climate in the kingdom, which is usually hot and dry. Finally, there is the cultural aspect. In particular, Turkey offers a mix of European style of architecture and elements of Turkish and Islamic culture that appeals to many Saudi tourists. For example, Ayasofya, Sultan Ahmed Mosque, and Bosphorus Strait, among others, all have historical significances and connotations. In addition, Turkey represents the historical nostalgia of the shared history and has countless museums and other attractions of the Ottomans and other ancient civilizations, which attract many people from the kingdom.

Historically, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have agreed on many issues since the early stages of the development of bilateral relations, especially with respect to economy and tourism. The first agreement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia was in 1974 when both countries signed a Cultural Cooperation Agreement to promote both cultures, mutual cultural visits, arts, and music.<sup>12</sup> Since then, there has been tourism activity in both countries, as many Turks come to Saudi Arabia for religious purposes and many Saudis visit Turkey for tourism and business. However, in the years that followed, there were many developments in the tourism industry worldwide, as well as political and socioeconomic developments in Turkey and in Saudi Arabia that helped push both nations to engage in further cooperation in various fields, including tourism.

There are various reasons why Saudi tourists became such a phenomenon in Turkey's tourism industry, especially in recent years. First is Turkey's economic expansion and development and promotion of tourism, which accompanied the introduction by the AKP leadership in 2007 of a tourism plan for the 2023 Vision of the Republic of Turkey that focused on promoting Turkey, not only to Europe, but also to Arab countries including the

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(12) *Daily Sabah*, "2018: Year of Turkish-Saudi Arabian Culture," June 16, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2017/06/16/2018-year-of-turkish-saudi-arabian-culture>.

kingdom.<sup>13</sup> Second, Saudi citizens also experienced high levels of income due an increase in oil prices in the early 2000s, and many in the middle class found travel in Turkey affordable. Third, the effects in the Arab countries of the upheavals and instability of early 2011 were crucial in pushing many Saudi (and also Gulf) tourists to abstain from visiting familiar destinations in nearby countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon and to begin looking for a new vacation spot. Turkey was the chosen destination for many Saudi tourists because it was politically stable, had a well-developed tourism infrastructure, diverse sightseeing attractions, and cultural familiarity.

Fourth, and last, in 2012–2015, the wide spread of social media networks in Saudi society and increased numbers of users who share their travel photos with friends and relatives via social media networks, including Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat, among others, have contributed to the Saudi tourist phenomenon in Turkey. According to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology in the kingdom, more than 58% of the population used social media, with 11 million using Facebook and more than 9 million using Twitter.<sup>14</sup> The widespread sharing in social media networks has helped promote Turkey as a premier tourist (and business) destination with a moderate climate and attractive natural views, which is very welcoming toward the Saudi people. More recently, in 2016, another agreement was signed between Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and Information proclaiming 2018 as a joint Turkish-Saudi cultural year, in which both countries will host cultural promotions of arts and traditions and various other exhibitions.<sup>15</sup>

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(13) *TurkishPress.com*, "Tourism Minister Gunay: 2023 Target Is to Host 50 Million Tourists," Mar. 30, 2008, <http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?id=223193>.

(14) Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, "Facebook and Twitter Top in Number of Users: Over 18 Million Users of Social Media Programs and Applications in Saudi Arabia," Mar. 17, 2016, <https://mcit.gov.sa/en/media-center/news/89698>.

(15) *Daily Sabah*, "2018: Year of Turkish–Saudi Arabian Culture," June 16, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2017/06/16/2018-year-of-turkish-saudi-arabian-culture>.

## Turkey's Tourism Industry Following the Coup Attempt and Qatari Crisis

In the past few years, Turkey's tourism industry was influenced by many important national and international events. For example, the recent political tension with Russia in 2015 decreased the number of Russian tourists after the Russian government asked its citizens not to go to Turkey.<sup>16</sup> According to a 2015 report, 6,000 trips to Turkey were canceled; they were mostly trips to Antalya, where most Russian prefer to go.<sup>17</sup> Another important event was the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, which impacted Turkish national security and severely hurt the tourism industry for several months. Moreover, the number of terrorist attacks in Turkey increased in recent years, the worst of which hit a restaurant that was mostly attended by Arabs and Saudi tourists on New Year's Eve 2017 in Istanbul.<sup>18</sup> Recently, the Turkish interference in the Qatari crisis has somewhat impacted the Gulf tourists, and especially the Saudis. According to a report, in mid-2017, the total number of Gulf tourists decreased by 10% following the Qatar crisis, which amounted for a 30% decrease in the number of Saudi tourists compared to the earlier year.<sup>19</sup> In addition, these events deterred many European tourists from coming to Turkey, as well as other tourists, including Saudis and other Arabs; however, they were less deterred than the Europeans.

Arabs and Saudis, especially in the aftermath of the coup attempt in 2016, were less hesitant to come to Turkey but most did postpone their travel plans for

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(16) On November 24, 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian airplane that was flying in Turkish airspace. Immediately thereafter, the two countries froze their relations and Russia issued an order prohibiting its citizens from going to Turkey.

(17) Mirjam Schmitt, "Turkey's Tourist Industry Is in Crisis," *Deutsche Welle*, Dec. 9, 2015, [www.dw.com/en/turkeys-tourist-industry-is-in-crisis/a-18903382](http://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-tourist-industry-is-in-crisis/a-18903382).

(18) NTV Haber, "Reina gece kulübüne terör saldırısı: 39 kişi hayatını kaybetti," Jan. 2, 2017, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/reina-gece-kulubune-teror-saldirisi-39-kisi-hayatini-kaybetti,ZiTsOjXOJE-yOXaDjQ8WqQ>.

(19) مهديب المهديب، اندياز تركيا يفقدها ٣٠٪ من السياح السعوديين، الوطن اونلاين، ٢٠١٧-٠٦-١٥، [http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Politics/News\\_Detail.aspx?ArticleID&306571=CategoryID. 1=](http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Politics/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID&306571=CategoryID. 1=)

some weeks and/or months, however, and some chose different destinations. Politically, there were rumors following the coup attempt attributed to the Saudi embassy that it had warned its citizens not to go to Turkey and asked them to postpone their travels.<sup>20</sup> The embassy subsequently issued a press release denying any such warning.<sup>21</sup>

Millions of tourists come to Turkey annually, mostly from Europe, Russia, and countries in the Middle East. Although, European tourists outnumbered Arab tourists by 5 million to 2.5 million (and Saudi tourists composed 25% of the latter group), but a spending comparison shows that Europeans spend an average of \$50 in Turkey a day, while Saudi tourists spend an average of \$500, according to Hüseyin Kırk, director of the Middle East Travel and Tourism Agencies.<sup>22</sup> The Arab tourists, and Saudis in particular, are vital element in the Turkish tourism industry because they spend much more than their counterparts of other nationalities. This new trend, which can be termed the Saudi tourist phenomenon in Turkey's tourism industry, can lead to further economic development and support important new emerging direct and indirect businesses. For example, retail, malls, shopping centers, residential sectors and real estates have seen dramatically improving outlooks. According to GYODER, Turkey's Association of Real Estate Investment Companies, Saudi investors represent the largest share of all the Arab countries and is only the second after Iraqi investors among top 10 foreign companies investing in Turkey.<sup>23</sup> In 2016, Saudi investors bought more than 500,000 square meters (sqm) of real estate, which amounts to 4,594,209 sqm of the total sold space

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(20) Anadolu Agency, "Saudi embassy denies reports of Turkey travel warning," June 25, 2017, <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-embassy-denies-reports-of-turkey-travel-warning/848949>.

(21) Ibid.

(22) *Dunya.com*, "Türk turizmi Ortadoğu pazarına yönelecek," Mar. 24, 2016, <https://www.dunya.com/sektorler/turizm/turk-turizmi-ortadogu-pazarina-yonelecek-haberi-311520>.

(23) Wouter Molman, "Saudis Lead Gulf Realty Investors in Turkey," *Saudi Gazette*, Mar. 2, 2017, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/174012/Saudis-lead-Gulf-realty-investors-in-Turkey>.

and involved more than 1,327 transactions.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Turkey's sales of real estate increased more than 4.5% in 2016, with more than 1.2 million sold properties.<sup>25</sup> The phenomenon of Saudi tourists that became evident in Turkey in the last few years could be seen as economically influential and beneficial for both the direct and indirect sectors. However, the only way for Saudis to go and visit Turkey is by air; therefore, airlines companies in the two countries are crucial in boosting the tourism sector.

### **Saudi and Turkish Aviation Sector**

In the aviation sector, Saudi Airline, a Saudi national carrier, only had flights to Istanbul until last year, but the company recently added Ankara as a second Turkish destination, with seven flights a week.<sup>26</sup> Turkish Airlines, the national airline of Turkey, began to see high demand for traveling from Saudi cities toward Turkey's multiple cities. Because of this, in 2011, Turkish Airlines opened a regional office in Riyadh to manage the increased business. After four years, in 2015, Turkish Airlines opened its first Arabic-language customer service center.<sup>27</sup> As a result, now Turkish Airlines operates multiple flights from different cities in Saudi Arabia, including Jeddah, Riyadh, Dammam, and more recently, Yanbu, Taif, and Qassim, to numerous Turkish cities, including Ankara, Istanbul, and the newly added destination of Trabzon. Turkish Airlines now offers 70 flights to and from Saudi Arabia.<sup>28</sup> In addition there is also Pegasus, a private Turkish low-fare airline company, which

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(24) Ibid.

(25) Ibid.

(26) Saudia World, "Saudia to Operate Direct Flights to Ankara," Aug. 16, 2016, <https://svworld.net/en/2016/08/saudia-to-operate-direct-flights-to-ankara/>.

(٢٧) البوابة، الخطوط الجوية التركية تطلق مركز اتصال هاتفياً باللغة العربية، ٥ تموز ٢٠١٥، <https://www.albawaba.com/ar/business/pr-الخطوط-الجوية-التركية-تطلق-مركز-اتصال-هاتفياً-باللغة-العربية-٧١٥٥٧٦>.

(28) Pegasus Airline, Press Releases, "Pegasus Network Now Extends to Saudi Arabia via Flynnas Codeshare Partnership," May 11, 2016, <https://www.flypgs.com/en/press-room/press-releases/pegasus-network-now-extends-to-saudi-arabia-via-flynnas-codeshare-partnership>.

last year signed an agreement with Flynas, a private Saudi low-fare airline company, to operate flights from Saudi Arabia to Turkish cities, including Ankara, Istanbul, Trabzon, Adan, and Hatay.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this noticeable increase in Saudi tourists going to Turkey helped expand business cooperation between two countries, and especially for the low-fare airline companies.

### **Focus on Trabzon: New Impacts and the Emerging Real Estate Economy**

Trabzon began to be seen as tourist destination in recent years and is mostly visited by Saudis, who began to pour into the city between 2013 and 2017. The city offers many sightseeing opportunities, a moderate climate, a variety of scenic mountains and lakes, and an international airport that receives direct flights. The hundreds of thousands of Saudi tourists coming specifically to Trabzon and to its most favored lake (of four), Uzungöl, definitely have impacts on the socioeconomic conditions and infrastructure of the city. This phenomenon promises to make Turkey, and specifically the northeastern Black Sea regions, experience a very high level of economic development, which promises to improve this region significantly. In addition, the Saudis tourist phenomenon may bring about many new cultural and governmental developments in the Turkish tourism strategy and tourism industry.

The influx of tourists from the Middle Eastern countries and the Saudi tourist phenomenon in Turkey's tourism industry are relatively new developments. Since the Saudi tourists represent the highest impact in terms of number of tourists and their economic value to Turkey's tourism and businesses as well, it is critical to focus on the reasons and the impacts of the Saudi tourist phenomenon, both directly, on the tourism sector, and indirectly, on other sectors involving various businesses in Turkey.

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(29) Ibid.



According to the Tourism Data Bank, the number of Saudi tourists who visited Trabzon in 2012 was only 5 but by 2013 it had jumped to 868, in 2014 the number was 6,411, and in 2015 it had tripled to 19,813.<sup>30</sup> The huge increase in the numbers of Saudi tourists who come specifically to Trabzon has triggered many questions and suggested various actions for interested business and government agencies regarding how to improve and attract even more Saudi tourists. For example, Turkish Airlines decided to launch its first direct flights from the Saudi Arabian cities of Jeddah and Riyadh to Trabzon in June 2013.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in 2013, the governor of Trabzon, Recep Kızılcık, received a number of Saudi journalists who had accompanied the first direct flight from Saudi Arabia to Trabzon.<sup>32</sup> In 2016, more than 400,000 Arab tourists visited Trabzon; of which Saudi tourists composed more than 90% of the group.<sup>33</sup> And in the first eight months of 2017, the number of Saudi tourists who visited Trabzon reached 350,000.<sup>34</sup> According to the Trabzon Metropolitan Municipality, the average stay of Saudi tourists increased from an average of less than two days in earlier years to seven or eight days in 2016.<sup>35</sup>

From an economic perspective, Trabzon has witnessed a boom in its local and economic infrastructure as hundreds of restaurants, small shops, hotels, and malls were established in the past several years. In 2015, Trabzon generated more than \$1.3 billion from Arab tourists, mostly Saudis.<sup>36</sup> The

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(30) Turizmdatabank, "Trabzon'da Suudi Turist Akini," accessed Jan. 11, 2017, <http://www.turizmdatabank.com/haber/trabzon-turizmi-verileri-araplar>.

(31) *Haberler*, "Suudi'li Gazeteciler, Trabzon'da, Haberler, Suudi'li Gazeteciler, Trabzon'da," May 13, 2013, <https://www.haberler.com/suudi-li-gazeteciler-trabzon-da-4587328-haber/>.

(32) Ibid.

(33) *Hürriyet*, "Suudi Arabistan Büyükelçisi'nden Trabzon açıklaması.," Oct. 26, 2017, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/suudi-arabistan-buyukelcisinden-trabzon-aciklamasi-40624010>

(34) Ibid.

(35) Yeni Mesaj, "Arap turistler Trabzon'u Sevdi," July 14, 2016, <http://www.yenimesaj.com.tr/gundem/arap-turistler-trabzonu-sevdi-h13028892.html>.

(36) *Daily Sabah*, "Turkey's Black Sea Region Hotspot for Gulf Arab Tourists, June 14, 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/tourism/2016/06/15/turkeys-black-sea-region-hotspot-for-gulf-arab-tourists>.

Saudi tourist phenomenon was evident in the economic development of Trabzon's emerging real estate business, as the Saudis have the lion's share of foreign direct investment in the city, which exceeds \$5 billion in total.<sup>37</sup> Other Gulf countries are also big investors, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), at second with \$2 billion, followed by Qatar and Kuwait.<sup>38</sup> Most of these capitals engage in building residential projects, resorts, and hotels. Trabzon does not yet have a five-star hotel, but one is being built by a UAE construction company.<sup>39</sup> This business investment by the Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, not only in Trabzon, but in all of Turkey, would not have happened if Turkish authorities had not revised land law concerning foreign ownership. In 2012, Turkey amended Article 35 of Land Registry Law No. 2644, which enabled foreign businesses to own much larger tracts of property and canceled the reciprocity requirement for ownership for selected countries.<sup>40</sup> According to 2017 data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, up until August 2017, 763 houses had been sold to Saudi citizens in Trabzon.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, as of October 2017, 30 Saudi companies had registered with the Trabzon Chamber of Commerce and Industry.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, current statistics and development show two things: Turkey's strategic promotions in recognition of the importance of the Saudi tourists and the Saudi tourists' desire for, and appreciation of, Trabzon's unique character. But why do some Saudi tourists admire Trabzon?

(٣٧) أريبيان بزنس، السعوديون يستثمرون بـ ١٩ مليار ريال في طرابزون التركية، ٢٤ أغسطس ٢٠١٧، <http://arabic.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/society/2016/aug/24/420533>

(38) Suliman Al-Atiqi et al., "Turkey-GCC Relations: Trends and Outlook," Oxford Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum and the International Cooperation Platform, 2015, [https://www.oxgaps.org/files/turkey-gcc\\_relations\\_trends\\_and\\_outlook\\_2015.pdf](https://www.oxgaps.org/files/turkey-gcc_relations_trends_and_outlook_2015.pdf). For further details on land ownership and new updates, please refer to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Buying Property in Turkey: Guide for Foreigners," <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/guidance-for-foreigners.en.mfa>.

(٣٩) أريبيان بزنس، السعوديون يستثمرون بـ ١٩ مليار ريال في طرابزون التركية، ٢٤ أغسطس ٢٠١٧، <http://arabic.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/society/2016/aug/24/42053>

(40) Al-Atiqi et al., "Turkey-GCC Relations."

(41) *Hürriyet*, "Suudi Arabistan Büyükelçisi'nden Trabzon açıklaması."

(42) Ibid.

## Trabzon's Natural Social and Cultural Landscapes

Turkey's main attractive city for tourism is Istanbul and then come the western coastal cities, Yalova, located on the Marmara Sea; Izmir, on the Aegean Sea; and Antalya, on the Mediterranean Sea. However, the impact of new streams of tourists from countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, have created a new tourist destination for the Turkish tourism industry: the Black Sea region. The most attractive area in the Black Sea region is Trabzon province, which is located in northeastern Turkey and has a total area of 4,658 km and in 2016, a total population of 779.379.<sup>43</sup> Trabzon is an interesting province that has many natural landscapes and a moderate climate. It is also a historic place that has historical museums and mosques and interesting local culture, which differ from the more developed cities, such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. In addition, Trabzon has more than 700 mountains and four lakes, including Uzungöl, plus the moderate weather along the Black Sea and landscapes that appeal to some Saudi tourists.<sup>44</sup>

Trabzon is a part of the rural provinces, which have a cultural background different from that of the cities in the western provinces, which are very urbanized and populated with a number of millions of people. For example, Trabzon, along with other rural areas in Turkey, tends to be more conservative than the western part. In fact, a recent study pointed out that more than 60% of Turkish citizens in Trabzon identify themselves as conservative, 51% considered religion an integral part of their lives, and 33% felt that family was important.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Trabzon province has more than 900 mosques, making it eighth among Turkish cities in number of mosques; Istanbul is the

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(43) *Nufusu.com*, "Trabzon Nüfusu," 2016, <https://www.nufusu.com/il/trabzon-nufusu>; Trabzon Gazeteciler Cemiyeti, "Trabzon Geografya," [http://www.trabzongazetecilerce-miyeti.org.tr/Trabzon\\_Cografya.html](http://www.trabzongazetecilerce-miyeti.org.tr/Trabzon_Cografya.html).

(44) Ibid.

(45) Yavuz Alptekin, "Siyasal Ve Kültürel Yönleriyle Trabzon'da Muhafazakârlık," *Journal of the Institute of Black Sea Studies*, 2, no. 2 (2016): 95–179, [http://www.ktu.edu.tr/dosyalar/karendergi\\_adl1b1.pdf](http://www.ktu.edu.tr/dosyalar/karendergi_adl1b1.pdf).

first, with more than 3,000 mosques.<sup>46</sup> Saudi tourists coming to Turkey tend to be conservative in nature and are not interested in the western type of tourism or nightlife, alcoholic products, non-halal food, or western-style mixed male and female beaches. In addition, Saudi tourists usually come along with their family and children, so Saudi women who visit as tourists feel comfortable wearing the hijab and the common dress in Saudi Arabia, the abaya, as some Turkish women wear the hijab as well. The common element of religion and the shared social values have helped Saudi tourists feel comfortable in Trabzon, and its culture makes it a welcoming destination for conservative tourists, a group that includes almost all the Saudi tourists who come to Turkey. Turkish culture in general and Trabzon's local culture in particular tend to be conservative toward western items such as alcohol products, as evident in the fact that Trabzon has very few restaurants that offer alcoholic drinks. Turkey's law does not prohibit the selling of alcohol, but each city's municipality has certain laws that regulate this type of business, based on the values and roles of each community.

### **Challenges and Future of Saudi Tourists in Trabzon**

The Saudi tourist phenomenon has undoubtedly benefited Turkey and, especially Trabzon's tourism industry, especially the real estate firms. This trend was supported by two important things, strategical promotion of Turkish tourism and quick legal adaptability to the needs of the Saudi (and Gulf) tourist. The case of Saudi tourists in Turkey and Trabzon presents a new and creative example of merging two concepts of tourism and business. It started when a few Saudi tourists chose Turkey and Trabzon in particular as their destination and subsequently became as their favorite city. Then, those who had visited as tourists came again as businesspeople and decided

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(46) *Haber 61*, "Trabzon'da kaç cami var?," Jan. 15, 2014, <https://www.haber61.net/gundem/trabzonda-kac-cami-var-h169126.html>.

to own a property for personal use or business purposes and investment in their favorite city, Trabzon. This was considered a new trend in the tourism industry whereby business results from tourism and both continue to support each other sustainably to increase the customer base.

However, the case of Saudi tourists in Turkey has a certain economic, cultural, and geographic background may challenge this unprecedented development. On one hand, it is important to emphasize that the Turks and the Saudis share elements of culture, history, and religion, plus they are located in close proximity. On the other hand, there are challenges for the success of the Saudi tourist phenomenon in the Turkish tourism industry; for example, differences in language are considered to be a barrier as people rarely speak each other's language. This may cause misunderstandings between tourists and locals, as when trying to communicate with a taxi driver or doing business or otherwise and communicating with the locals. Other factors as well play a key role in the people's understanding of the two countries such as economics, disparities in standards of living, socioeconomic conditions, and educational levels.

In addition to these two factors, social media networks have also been a key in conveying the nature and culture of Turkey to Saudi citizens, and new Turkish soap operas and other television series now encourage more tourists to appreciate Turkey and the city of Trabzon. At the same time, as easily as social media can market Turkey and Trabzon, it can also be used to warn tourists not to go there in response to incidents between tourists and locals, as reported by the media in recent years. The first occurred in September 2015, when a Saudi tourist was assaulted while visiting one of the parks in the city of Urfa by a gang; fortunately he found his way to the home of a local, who helped him and called the police.<sup>47</sup> Second, in the

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(٤٧) القناة السعودية الإخبارية، السفارة السعودية بتركيا: المواطن الذي تعرض لمحاولة «قتل» بخير، الراصد، ٢٩ سبتمبر ٢٠١٥. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mizMheX46KA>

same month and year, a Saudi family, including a mother and her children, was assaulted and mistreated due to miscommunication and their entering of a handicapped area at Atatürk Airport, the biggest airport in Istanbul.<sup>48</sup> However, according to the husband, the Turkish authorities called and apologized for what happened and invited him and his family to visit Turkey again.<sup>49</sup> In addition, according to *Al-Hayat*, the Saudi ambassador in Turkey told the press that the embassy was following up on the case with the Turkish authorities and offering full support for the mistreated Saudi family.<sup>50</sup> The third instance happened recently, in July 2017 in the city of Trabzon, where a video went viral on various social media networks showing a local arguing loudly with a Saudi couple, who were there as tourists.<sup>51</sup> Regardless of the reasons for these incidents, once the stories appear on television, in reports, and on the social media networks (for example, with hashtags), for many Saudi families and other tourists, they detract from the image of Turkey as a friendly place to visit.

However, Turkish officials are taking further steps in dealing with such situations, as shown when they promptly apologized to the tourists and encouraged them to visit Turkey again. Moreover, the municipality in Trabzon erected street signs and signs for landmarks in Arabic, and many local schools in Trabzon and the surrounding areas such as Tonya began offering courses in Arabic.<sup>52</sup>

The Saudi tourist phenomenon triggered the interest of Saudi embassy

(48) *Arab News*, "Istanbul Airport Staff Rough Up Saudi Family," Aug. 31, 2015, [www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/799496](http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/799496).

(49) *Emirates 24/7 News*, "Airport Assault on Family: Turkey Apologises to Saudi," September 16, 2015, [www.emirates247.com/news/region/airport-assault-on-family-turkey-apologises-to-saudi-2015-09-16-1.603790](http://www.emirates247.com/news/region/airport-assault-on-family-turkey-apologises-to-saudi-2015-09-16-1.603790)

(٥٠) محمد الداود، استنفاار في السفارة السعودية إثر الاعتداء على أسرة، الحياة، ٣٠ أغسطس ٢٠١٥، <http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/10870698/استنفاار-في-السفارة-السعودية-إثر-الاعتداء-على-أسرة>.

(٥١) شاهد بالفيديو: تركي يعتدي علي سعودي، يوتيوب، ٢٥ يوليو ٢٠١٧، [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dStFT723\\_14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dStFT723_14)

(52) *61 Saat*, "Trabzon'da İstiklal Marşı'nın Arapça okunmasının yasal olduğu ortaya çıktı!," Mar. 17, 2016, <https://www.61saat.com/bolgesel/trabzon-da-istiklal-marsi-nin-arapca-okunma-sinin-yasal-oldugu-ortaya-cikti-h400234.html>.

in Ankara and the Saudi ambassador, Waleed Al-Khereiji. The Saudi ambassador's visit to Trabzon at the end of October 2017 and his meeting with the Trabzon governor, Dr. Orhan Fevzi Gümrükçüoğlu, show the importance of the Saudi tourist phenomenon from an economic, cultural, and tourist perspective. According to Akasyam Haber, Saudi Arabia was considering opening a consulate in Trabzon to facilitate any business or issues of Saudi citizens and observe Saudi tourists and businesses' developing projects.<sup>53</sup>

### **Recent Developments in Saudi-Turkish Relations**

While this report mainly focuses on Turkish tourism industry and the Saudi tourists in Turkey, it is important to take into consideration the importance and the development of the bilateral relations in recent years. It is important to note that real developments of bilateral relations and high-level agreements between the two countries did not begin until the early 2000s.<sup>54</sup> However, the first official high-level visit by a representative of King Abdullah occurred in 2006, followed by another visit in 2007, and as a result of these two visits, both countries have concluded various agreements on a number of businesses, including tourism, and agreed to increase Saudi investment in Turkey to \$25 billion.<sup>55</sup> In addition, before becoming a president, Recep Tayip Erdogan visited the Kingdom twice in 2010; on his second visit, in March, he received the King Faisal International Prize for his services to Islam.<sup>56</sup>

As recently as April 2016 and during the visit of the King Selman to Turkey, both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish the Saudi-

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(53) *Akasyam Haber*, "Trabzon'a arabistan konsolosluğu açılacak mı!," Oct. 28, 2017, [www.akasyam.com/trabzona-arabistan-konsoloslugu-acilacak-mi-156092/](http://www.akasyam.com/trabzona-arabistan-konsoloslugu-acilacak-mi-156092/).

(54) In 1966, King Faisal visited Turkey as part of his attendance at an international conference.

(55) Muhittin Ataman, "Turkish-Saudi Arabian relations during the Arab uprisings: Towards a strategic partnership?" *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 4 (fall 2012), <https://www.insightturkey.com/author/muhittin-ataman/turkish-saudi-arabian-relations-during-the-arab-uprisings-towards-a-strategic-partnership>.

(56) H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey, "Press Release: Winners announced, 2010/1431 H King Faisal International Prize for Service to Islam."

Turkish Strategic Cooperation Council.<sup>57</sup> The idea of this council is to foster High levels of all kinds of cooperation, including political, military, economic, energy, bilateral trade, and investments. Subsequently, the first meeting of the council occurred in 2017 in Ankara, where officials of the two countries met and discussed the possibility of increasing the free trade and bilateral business cooperation. This recent development shows that both countries acknowledge the importance of further developments, especially in economic and business terms.

Saudi-Turkish bilateral relations seem to be stronger than ever, especially in economic terms. The recent visit of King Salman showed that Turkey represents a close ally and an important partner. On the popular level, the number of Saudi tourists kept growing since mid-2000s and witnessed a noticeable increase in the past four years. Although some different stances appeared between the two countries regarding some issues, for example, the Qatari crisis, both countries, including their citizens who are in business, were able to maintain neutral positions regarding each other, and especially in their bilateral political and economic relations. These developments indicate that Saudi-Turkish relations seem to be stable and may even strengthen further. Moreover, with such developments, the phenomenon of the influx of Saudi tourists is likely to continue.

## **Conclusion**

Tourism in Turkey is one of the most active businesses in the country, and according to the 2023 Vision of the Republic of Turkey, by that year, tourism was expected to generate \$50 billion and the number of tourists was expected to reach 50 million. Tourists from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represent a huge proportion of tourists from the Arab countries and favor Turkey, especially Trabzon. Turkey is becoming a very attractive tourism destination

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(57) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, "Bilateral political relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia," <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-saudi-arabia-relations.en.mfa>.



for Arabs in particular because of its geographic location, moderate climate, coastal beaches and natural landscape, and mix of European and Turkish Islamic culture. Saudi tourists became a noticeable phenomenon over the past five years as a result of Turkey's economic development and expansion of tourism in response to the 2023 Vision of the Republic of Turkey. As a result of the Arab uprisings starting in 2011 and the resultant insecurity in some Arab tourist countries, Turkey became an alternative for many Saudi tourists.

Recent politics were crucial in the tourism scene in Turkey, such as the coup attempt in mid-2016, which was damaging for Turkey, discouraged many tourists and business from growing as a result of the political and social unrest. Although many European tourists canceled their trips, the number of cancelations from Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, was much smaller. However, Turkey's stance on the Qatari crisis has had some impact, as seen in the immediate drop in the number of tourists coming from Saudi Arabia and adjacent countries in the days and months that followed.

The impacts of this phenomenon extend throughout the Turkish economy, and especially the real estate sector, as projects and contracts began to pour into the country as a result of the Saudi tourists' large numbers and business dealings. Trabzon witnessed the most significant development, with the establishment of 30 new Saudi companies and visits to the city from more than 350,000 Saudi tourists as of August 2017. As a result, there was growth in Turkey's real estate and tourism-related businesses such as aviation, as shown in the significant increase in direct flights between many cities in the two countries, including Trabzon.

Numbers and facts, however, despite the Turkish national unstable experiences in 2016 and Turkish involvement in the Qatari crisis (by political and economic supports), indicate that tourism industry was not much impacted. Figures show that the Saudi tourism phenomenon may continue apace or even increase in the future. This development indicates that Turkish

and Saudi bilateral relations may improve due to the investment and economic projects that were initiated in Turkey by many Saudi tourists.

The city of Trabzon is unique due to the combination of its natural environment, climate, local culture, and welcoming attitudes toward tourists. Trabzon could capitalize on this phenomenon and improve its reputation by providing facilities for more businesses and services. Of course, there remain some impediments to the Saudi tourist phenomenon, including the different languages and some evidence of mistreatment of Saudi tourists. Nonetheless, the Saudi tourist phenomenon is a new development in Turkey and in the economics of tourism worldwide, in which citizens of another country came as tourists and then return as businesspeople.



**About the Author**

**Mohammed Aldujayn** joined the KFCRIS as a research fellow in August 2017. His research focuses on Turkish studies, Middle Eastern issues, and migration studies. Before then, he graduated with an associate degree in Materials Management from Institute of Public Administration (IPA) in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Later, he graduated with a bachelor degree in Journalism, Advertising and Media Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2015. After that, he won a scholarship to study Turkish and a master degree in Journalism and Communications from Istanbul University in the Republic of Turkey. His recent published work is Turkish Migration Laws: Syrian Refugees or Turkish Future Citizens – Istanbul – 2016. Along with his mother tongue Arabic, he is fluent in English and Turkish.



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