

Halal Tourism in the Context of Tourism Sector in Tunisia: Controversies, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of the tourism industry in Tunisia from its independence in 1956 to contemporary Tunisia with a special focus on the development of halal tourism. In assessing the tourism sector in Tunisia, a typology is used. This typology makes it clear that Tunisia is a prominent tourist destination in several types of tourism, including beach tourism, while in other types it remains underdeveloped. Regarding the emerging form of halal tourism, Tunisia is lagging behind in its development. This may come as a surprise given the fact that Tunisia is a popular tourist destination and a Muslim majority country. Although there are different reasons for this, I would argue that many things can be explained by looking at the political context in Tunisia. The reluctance of government actors hinders the profound development of halal tourism. The policies that have been put forward in the past by Bourguiba and Ben Ali have had an undeniable impact on the general opinion of contemporary Tunisian society on this matter. Even though Tunisia is faced with challenges, Tunisia can still be a suitable country for halal tourism while maintaining other forms of tourism.

Keywords: Tunisia, halal tourism, religious tourism, opportunities and challenges.

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Introduction

This research stems from the finding that Tunisia has difficulties with maintaining its image of being a “Muslim-friendly” country. According to the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) of 2019, Tunisia holds the 15th place of OIC-countries regarding meeting the criteria of a Muslim-friendly and halal tourism destination. The GMTI of 2019 has evaluated 130 countries regarding their openness and friendliness towards Muslim travellers. In their annual report, Mastercard and CrescentRating highlight the latest developments and trends. It is said that Muslim travellers are becoming one of the fastest growing segments in the global tourism industry. Despite this observation, it appears that until today too little is being invested in a type of tourism that is adapted to the religious and cultural needs of Muslims.² Although this is not true for all countries, it certainly applies to the current situation in Tunisia. In the different annual reports that have been published from 2011 onwards, Tunisia keeps switching places, sometimes it is in the top 10 of OIC-countries and at other times it is not.³ This has not been the case for all countries. Turkey, for example, has been successful in maintaining a place in the top 5.

The thematic framework of this paper is the development of the tourism industry in Tunisia starting from its independence in 1956. Special attention will be given to the question why halal tourism remains

² “Mastercard-CrescentRating: Global Muslim Travel Index 2019,” *CrescentRating*, 4-5,

https://www.crescentrating.com/download/thankyou.html?file=hJGfOCBy_20190406_MC-CR_GMTI_2019_Interactive.pdf.

³ CrescentRating has been publishing reports on Muslim friendly travel and halal destinations since 2011. The current GMTI-rating, however, is the result of a partnership between CrescentRating and Mastercard. When comparing the score Tunisia has been given in these 9 years, I have two remarks. In not all the reports there is a clear distinction between OIC and non-OIC countries. I think it is important to always keep in mind if this distinction is made or not. Secondly, the total number of evaluated countries influences the score. In 2013, only 50 countries were evaluated compared to 130 in 2019.

underdeveloped compared to other kinds of tourism. In defining halal tourism, I am referring to the definition given by Battour and Ismail. They state that “halal tourism is *any tourism object or action which is permissible according to Islamic teachings to use or engage by Muslims in tourism industry.*”⁴ In practice, it is often used to refer to halal accommodations where alcohol, gambling and pork are forbidden. The principle of gender separatism is maintained in swimming pools and guests have the option of using private beaches. Muslims are given the chance to pray and there is religion-inspired animation instead of nightclubs.

I am arguing that the development of the tourism industry has to be studied in the overall political and social context of a country. This historical framework will lead to a better understanding of why halal tourism in Tunisia has not been developed in a profound way. Both Habib Bourguiba and his successor, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, have ruled over Tunisia according to their own personal preferences. This includes subordinating Islam and any form of Islamic activism and religious commitment in the name of modernization, reform and security issues. Both presidents favoured secular policies in which religion, here Islam, was only used for reasons connected to political legitimacy and symbolism. This historical legacy still influences the Tunisian society and how they look at their tourism industry. From the civil society, there has been in recent years a demand for the further development of halal tourism in Tunisia. The question remains whether there is enough demand and support and whether politicians will respond to this demand.

The start of this paper lies in exploring how the tourism industry in Tunisia has been developed. This will give insight into the reasons why Tunisia has become a prominent destination for beach or coastal tourism. It also

⁴ Mohamed Battour and Mohd Nazari Ismail, “Halal tourism: Concepts, practises, challenges and future,” *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 19, (July 2016): 151

sheds light on the difficulties and challenges with which the tourism industry has been and still is faced. After having historically contextualized the tourism development in Tunisia, a typology or categorization of the different main forms of tourism in Tunisia is presented. This categorization helps to better grasp the reasons why tourists have chosen to visit the country. As religious tourism is an important kind of tourism in Tunisia, I will go deeper into the role religion, more specifically Islam, was attributed during the presidency of Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Having insight into the relation between politics and Islam is crucial to understand the sensitivities regarding the development of halal tourism in Tunisia. I chose to not include halal tourism in the categorization but to discuss it separately. This decision is made because halal tourism remains rather undeveloped and is not yet a tourism sector standing on its own according to my findings.

The methodology of this research paper is two-folded. A great deal of this paper is connected to literature study. On top of that, I have conducted my own small-scale research. I aimed to involve Tunisian citizens as well as Belgian citizens who have travelled to Tunisia. This research has contributed to a more in-depth insight into the sensitivities of halal tourism and the attitude of Tunisians as well as western travellers to the country. On top of that I got in touch with local tour operators and tried getting in touch with Tunisian political parties. Both proved to be difficult.⁵

⁵ The difficulties lay in limited time and the opportunities to get in touch with them. COVID-19 made travelling more difficult and therefore I had to rely on online communication. Having to rely on communicating through e-mail and other platforms proved not to be the best method. I therefore strongly advise to redo this research on a much larger scale and with interviews conducted in person instead of online surveys and communication through email.

The Tourism Development in Tunisia: An Overview

After a long process of struggle and decolonization, Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956. The colonial period had a damaging effect on the economy. President Bourguiba saw tourism as a means to save the severely affected economy.⁶ At the beginning of the 1960s a government agency, the Société Hôtelière et Touristique Tunisienne⁷, was founded which contributed to the development of the tourism industry.⁸ Tourism development in Tunisia was at first instance a state-led process. It was put forward by the government as a fundamental feature in order to gain economic benefits. Of all the accommodation facilities built in the period between 1960 and 1965, an estimated 40% was the result of initiatives by the government.⁹ In 1962, the SHTT almost entirely controlled the accommodation sector. This state led development process was only short lived, however, due to the introduction of *infatih*¹⁰ policies by which there was room created for privatization. It only took a few years to

⁶ The French colonial power left behind weak institutions in the economical field. On top of that, old social ties had weakened prior to and during the colonial period. It were French officials that held important positions such as administrative posts and ruled over the social and economic policies of Tunisia. All social and economic activity was in such a way regulated that it benefitted the French colonial power. Waleed Hazbun, "Rethinking Anti-Colonial Movements and the Political Economy of Decolonization: The Case of Tunisia," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, no. 1 (1994): 77-106.

⁷ National Society of Hotels and Tourism hereafter referred to with its abbreviation SHTT.

⁸ Robert Gan and José Smith, "Tourism and National Development Planning in Tunisia," *Tourism Management*, Vol. 13, no. 3 (1992): 331-36.

⁹ Robert A. Poirier and Stephan Wright, "The Political Economy of Tourism in Tunisia," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (March 1993): 156.

¹⁰ The term *infatih* is used to describe neoliberal policies in which a country is open to private investment. This private investment can go hand in hand with foreign direct investment.

almost entirely privatize the tourism sector (83% of the tourism industry was privatized by 1968).¹¹

In 1987 Ben Ali conducted a coup which led to the ousting of the first Tunisian President Bourguiba. Because of socio-economic and political changes, Tunisia started moving more and more towards pluralism and openness. The liberalization trend that had already started under Bourguiba continued with Ben Ali.¹² In order to make the liberalization trend more concrete, the Seventh National Development Plan (1987 – 1991) “called for a major reduction in the number of state enterprises.”¹³ Around 1990, Tunisia became one of the fastest growing tourism economies in the world.¹⁴ Although liberalization and privatization were introduced, the government remained an important actor. The government played a key role in for example the investment in infrastructure, the control over standards and the government took the responsibility of training the labour force and the overall management strategy.¹⁵ In the same period, Tunisia entered into competition with other Mediterranean countries that focused on coastal tourism. In the light of this competition, the government started to opt for a more diverse tourism industry and other sectors were discovered such as medical tourism. An important contribution to the diversification of the tourism industry was the incorporation of cultural tourism and the desert (e.g. organizing desert tour).¹⁶

¹¹ Heather Jeffrey and Sue Bleasdale, “Tunisia: Mass Tourism in Crisis?”, in *Mass Tourism in a Small World*, ed. David Harrison and Richard Sharpley (CABI International, 2017): 2.

¹² Selma Zaiane, “Heritage Tourism in Tunisia: Development one-way choice,” *Tourism Review*, Vol. 61, no. 3 (2006): 27.

¹³ Poirier and Wright, “The Political Economy of Tourism in Tunisia,” 151.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 155.

¹⁵ Gan and Smith, “Tourism and national development planning in Tunisia,” 331 – 332.

¹⁶ Dhia Essouaid and Hichem Rejeb, “An Approach to Tunisian Tourism According to the Political Changes between 2011 and 2016,” *American Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 5, no. 2, (2017): 45 – 49.

In general, the tourism sector was mostly designed to attract western tourists. Therefore, tourism in Tunisia has been labelled as “Eurocentric”.¹⁷ In the 1980s and 1990s, European tourists counted for 80% of the total number of tourists in Tunisia. Other tourists came from neighbouring countries such as Libya and Algeria. The number and the nationalities of tourists, however, fluctuates according to the political context. When President Ben Ali took the decision to reopen the borders with Libya, there was an increase of Libyan tourists.¹⁸ This is just one example of how politics has an influence on the tourism industry. The reason why there was a focus on European and North-American tourists lies partly in the personal preferences of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Both presidents wanted to portray Tunisia as a secular country. In developing tourism, there was no space created to invest in the potential of halal products or market.¹⁹ In general, the concept of halal tourism was not developed in the 20th century. Tunisia was thus not an exception when it did not invest in this kind of tourism. The idea of halal tourism only recently started to gain attention. What is remarkable in the case of Tunisia was the extent to which tourism was developed so that it was in line with a western demand.

Being overly dependent on the arrival of western tourists, in turn, can bring dangers to the future of the tourism industry in Tunisia. In the aftermath of 9/11, Europeans and North-Americans started to change their travel destinations and opted for other countries which seemed safer to them at that moment in time. This obviously had its effect on the Tunisian tourism sector and its economy in general. As European and North-American

¹⁷ Robert A. Poirier, “Tourism and Development in Tunisia,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 22, no. 1 (January 1995):160.

¹⁸ Waleed Hazbun, “Images of Openness, Spaces of Control: The Politics of Tourism Development in Tunisia,” *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 15, no. 2 (2007): 15.

¹⁹ Michele Carboni, Carlo Perelli and Giovanni Sistu, “Developing tourism products in line with Islamic beliefs: some insights from Nabeul–Hammamet,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 22, no. 1 (September 2016): 89.

tourists deserted from travelling to countries in the MENA-region, Arabs and Muslims started travelling more to Muslim-majority countries. The main reason was because they felt a growing hostility in North-America and Europe. Added to this, they felt that their mobility was limited because of new implemented rules.²⁰

That politics and the overall security situation in a country affects the tourism industry became yet again clear in 2011. When talking about 2011 in the geographical context of the MENA-region there is immediately thought about the *Arab Spring*. The term *Arab Spring* is used to refer to a series of uprisings and protests that arose in North-Africa and the Middle East at the end of 2010 and started spreading rapidly in 2011. The anti-government protests were marked by the slogans of the protestors demanding “the fall of the regime.”²¹ The tragic event of Mohamed Bouazizi setting himself on fire in the streets of Tunisia on the 17th of December 2010 is generally seen as the starting point of the Arab Spring.²² The uprisings and protests in Tunisia that eventually led to the ousting of president Ben Ali are called *the Jasmine Revolution*. These uprisings did

²⁰ Michele Carboni, Carlo Perelli and Giovanni Sistu, “Is Islamic Tourism a Viable Option for Tunisian Tourism?”, *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 11 (July 2014): 2; Ala Al-Hamarneh and Christian Steiner, “Islamic Tourism: Rethinking the Strategies of Tourism Development in the Arab World After September 11, 2001,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 24, no. 1 (June 2004): 175-176.

²¹ “The Arab Awakening,” *Al Jazeera*, February 20, 2012, accessed July 26, 2020: <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/general/2011/04/20114483425914466.html>.

²² Melani Cammett, “What is the Arab Spring?” *The Choices Program Brown University*, December 5, 2011, accessed July 26, 2020: <https://www.choices.edu/video/what-is-the-arab-spring/>; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Arab Spring,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, August 23, 2019, accessed July 26, 2020: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring> and Rania Abouzaïd, “Bouazizi: The Man Who Set Himself and Tunisia on Fire,” *Time*, Friday 21, 2011, accessed July 26, 2020: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2044723,00.html>.

not only affect the political environment but of course also the economy including the tourism industry. In 2011, the number of arrivals at the borders declined by around 31%.²³ When comparing January 2010 and January 2011, “the tourist sector recorded a 40% reduction.”²⁴ This is no surprise keeping in mind that a great part of international tourists no longer deemed Tunisia as a safe country. Anti-government protests were also present in Tunisia’s neighbouring countries. Libya was faced with a civil war in the aftermath of the protests. This resulted in a decrease of two million Libyan tourists. On top of that, an estimated 9.000 French tourists who were in Tunisia during the Jasmine Revolution chose to not finish their vacation.²⁵ If Tunisia was not tested enough, 2015 would be the year of total disaster. Three terrorist attacks happened in the course of 2015. This resulted in a significant decrease of the number of arrivals at the borders by 25.2% in comparison with 2014.²⁶ Such events have had a disastrous impact on the tourism development and on the economy overall. The graphic below is a statistical representation of the number of arrivals in Tunisia between 1995 and 2018.

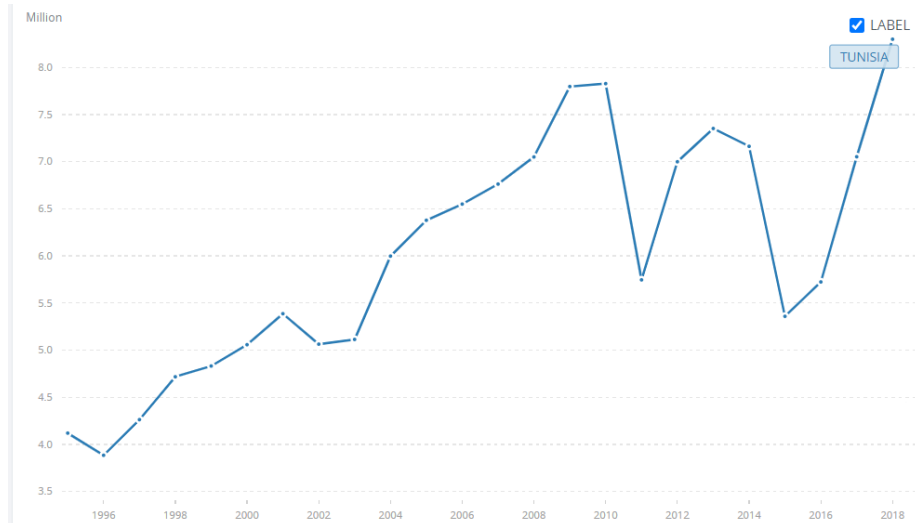
²³ “Tourisme en chiffres,” République Tunisienne: Ministère du Tourisme et de l’Artisanat, accessed July 26, 2020, <http://www.tourisme.gov.tn/fr/realisations-et-perspectives/tourisme-en-chiffres/statistiques-2011.html>.

²⁴ Dhia Essouaid and Hichem Rejeb, “An Approach to Tunisian Tourism, p. 46.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 46.

²⁶ “Tourisme en chiffres,” République Tunisienne: Ministère du Tourisme et de l’Artisanat, accessed July 26, 2020, <http://www.tourisme.gov.tn/fr/realisations-et-perspectives/tourisme-en-chiffres/statistiques-2011.html>.

Chart 1. The Number of Arrivals in Tunisia



Source: "International tourism, number of arrivals – Tunisia," *The World Bank*, ²⁷

Although Tunisia flourished quite early as a touristic destination, maintaining Tunisia as an alluring destination has not been without challenges. Everyone involved in developing tourism should be aware of the positive as well as the negative aspects of the current forms of tourism they are providing. The economy in Tunisia has been described as tourism-dependent given its considerable contribution to the GDP (around 7% for many years). On top of that, the tourism industry is important for job creation and foreign currency. Maintaining Tunisia as an overall prominent tourist destination should be one of the top priorities for government officials.

Why Travelling to Tunisia?

The motives to travel to a country are of course always strictly individual. Researchers have stated, however, that motivations may vary according to one's nationality. Whereas Europeans mostly go to Tunisia for coastal tourism, people from neighbouring countries such

²⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL?locations=TN>. accessed August 1st, 2020.

as Libya and Algeria are said to have other motivations. They perceive Tunisia as quite a liberal country where they are able to experience freedoms, they do not have in their home countries. Other motives are shopping opportunities and medical tourism.²⁸ As an early travel destination, Tunisia first attracted the attention of international tourists with its beautiful beaches. As coastal tourism has been the main facet of the tourism industry, Tunisia is nowadays still dependent on this sector. On top of that, Tunisia is suitable for many different forms of tourism. Creating a typology of the different forms of tourism in Tunisia has not been easy. The main issue relates to drawing distinctions between the different types of tourism. Another issue is that tourists have overlapping motives. Tourists engaging in religious tourism, for example, may have other motives besides religious or spiritual ones such as seeking knowledge about one's cultural heritage. Briefly speaking, Tunisia has been a prominent tourism destination in the following forms of tourism: coastal tourism, heritage and cultural tourism, religious tourism, medical tourism, sexual tourism and lastly ecotourism. In what follows, I'll elaborate on the role of religion and how it relates to the development of religious tourism, especially halal tourism.

The Relation Between Politics and Religion in Tunisia

In order to understand the difficulties and sensitivities connected to developing halal tourism, the role attributed to religion since Tunisia's independence should be examined. I do this by looking at three different periods: the presidency of Bourguiba (1956 – 1987), the presidency of Ben Ali (1987 – 2011) and the developments after the Jasmine Revolution.

1. Religion under the Presidency of Bourguiba

As already stated, Bourguiba ruled over Tunisia with secular policies. In order to understand the role that

²⁸ Carboni, Perelli and Sistu, "Developing Tourism Products," 92 – 93.

Islam played under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the meaning of secularism must be clarified. It should not be understood here as a clear division between religious and state institutions nor the separation between religion and politics. In the context of the years between 1956 and 2011, I am opting for McCarthy's definition of secularism as "a process of defining, managing , and intervening in religious life by the state."²⁹ Bourguiba and Ben Ali thus wanted Tunisia to be a secular state but this does not mean that religion was not important or did not play a role.³⁰ What it does mean is that both presidents constantly used religious symbolism in order to obtain political legitimacy. It was clear that Bourguiba and Ben Ali successfully tried to subordinate religion, and everything connected to it. Bourguiba started for example with undermining the effective power of clerics. It soon became clear that the president had put himself forward as the sole interpreter of Islam. Although Bourguiba used religious rhetoric, he was opposed to the revival of Islam in any shape or form. This led to Bourguiba being described as "a great manipulator of religious symbols".³¹ After a decade of reformism, debates about the place of religion as well as the nature of the Tunisian identity came to the fore. At the end of the 1960s and beginning 1970s, there was the period of "readjustment", as McCarthy calls it, in which there was more space left in public for the expression of religious belief and commitment.³² In official speeches and writing, Islam was now presented as a moral guide.

In 1981, the first Islamic-inspired political party was founded by Rached al-Ghannouchi called

²⁹ Rory McCarthy, "Re-thinking secularism in post-independence Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 19, no. 5, (2014): 734

³⁰ That religion remained important is clear when looking at the constitution in which Islam was described as the religion of Tunisia and that the president must be Muslim. McCarthy, "Re-thinking secularism," 736.

³¹ McCarthy, "Re-thinking secularism," 734.

³² *Ibid*, 738.

Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique (MTI). Since its establishment until the uprisings in 2010, the party faced severe oppression to the point where the movement developed a clandestine existence. With the establishment of MTI, the monopoly on religious authority of Bourguiba was contested. This was not the first time, however. What was different in 1981 was the more widespread support MTI seemed to enjoy. This explains why the party had to endure so much repression.

2. Religion under the Presidency of Ben Ali

When Ben Ali took over presidency from Bourguiba, Islam was reinterpreted so that Ben Ali could consolidate his power. By doing this, he also tried to ease the confrontation with oppositional forces especially Islamists. With Islamists I am referring to someone “who believes that Islam as body of faith has something crucial to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary and who seeks to implement this idea in some fashion as a matter of priority.”³³ The Zaytuna-mosque was given its autonomy back and radio and television were allowed to broadcast the adhaan (call to prayer). Religious symbolism was again found when Ben Ali went on a pilgrimage in 1988 and afterwards images of the president were widespread. For a short period, the opposition faced less oppression. It could be argued that during the 1980s, Tunisia was moving towards political pluralism. Yet again, religion was used for political reasons. As McCarthy explains:

By trying to demonstrate his own commitment to religion and religious tradition, Ben Ali was seeking to undermine any popular appeal the Islamists might be able to make. (...) Ben Ali was instrumentalizing religion, making

³³ Definition given by Volpi in Frédéric Volpi, “Political Islam Observed,” (London: Hurst Publishers, 2010), 14.

*concessions that appeared striking but which were in fact superficial, in order to undercut his opponents.*³⁴

When the results of the election in 1989 made clear that Ennahda, after the MTI renamed itself, was by far the most popular opposition force, repression started again.³⁵ Ben Ali tried to undermine the appeal of Ennahda and its members by portraying them as extremists. They were described as a threat to Islam. Therefore, the state had to intervene. The state became symbolized as the protector of Islam. In the following years, Ben Ali kept conducting repression towards Islamists and Islam-inspired political parties. In other words, Ben Ali tried to keep the religious sphere as minimal as possible.³⁶ It proved to be too early to develop a political context of pluralism in which Islamic-inspired parties were given a chance. In short, Bourguiba and Ben Ali instrumentalized religion for political objectives and authority. Both presidents gave themselves the sole authority to (re-)interpret Islam.

3. Developments After 2011

In October 2011, Ennahda won the first elections that were held after the toppling of Ben Ali and his regime. McCarthy sees this as an indicator that “large parts of the Tunisian population are more religious and socially conservative than Ben Ali’s secular façade suggested.”³⁷ Ennahda was not able to have the monopoly on political Islam, however, and new Islamic-inspired parties emerged like Jabhat al-Islah and Ansar al-Sharia. Ennahda formed a coalition with two other parties, Congrès pour la République and Ettakatol, both described as secular parties. Between October 2011 and

³⁴ McCarthy, “Re-thinking secularism,” 742.

³⁵ In these elections, members of Ennahda participated as independent candidates because the party had not been formally recognized as a political party and was thus not allowed to participate in the election.

³⁶ One example is when in 2006, the regime tried to prohibit the veil.

³⁷ McCarthy, “Re-thinking secularism,” 733.

January 2014, Ennahda remained the majority party in the government. Starting from 2013 the party started to lose its appeal to nationalist parties. Tunisians were again warned for the “Islamic threat” after the assassination of Chokri Belaid (leader of the left-wing) and explosions in the mountains close to the Algerian boarder. The main party that emerged was Nidaa Tunis, established by Beji Caid Essebsi, a former employee under president Bourguiba. Although Ennahda was defeated in the elections of 2014, it remained the second most-popular party and an agreement was made between both parties. Furthermore, the stance towards Islamic activism was normalized between 2015 and 2016.³⁸ The new situation has been described as “twin toleration” in which both the state and religious Tunisians accept each other.³⁹

Halal Tourism in Tunisia: Opportunities and Challenges

A major sector of the international tourism industry is religious tourism which often, but not exclusively, takes the form of pilgrimages to sacred places. Although Tunisia is a Muslim majority country, it also provides opportunities for Christian and Jewish religious tourists. In the light of this research paper, I will limit myself to discussing Islamic religious tourism. This does not mean that Christians or Jews don't visit Tunisia for religious purposes. To mention only one example, for centuries there has been an annual pilgrimage to the El Ghriba Synagogue in Djerba.

³⁸ Fabio Merone, Ester Sigillò and Damiano De Facci, “Nahda and Tunisian Islamic Activism.” In *New Opposition in the Middle East*, edited by Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh, Palgrave, (2018): p. 182.

³⁹ Rory McCarthy, “The politics of consensus: al-Nahda and the stability of the Tunisian transition,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, (2019): 2.

1. Context of Islamic Tourism in Tunisia

To define Islamic tourism, the definition given by Carboni, Perelli and Sistu is used. They state that:

Islamic tourism is defined as tourism in accordance with Islam, involving people of the Muslim faith who are interested in keeping with their personal religious habits whilst travelling. This definition is not limited to travel for religious purposes and does not concern exclusively travel to or within Muslim countries.⁴⁰

It should be no surprise that Tunisia is filled with mosques given the fact that 99% of the population is Muslim. According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, there were an estimated of 6099 mosques all over Tunisia in December 2019.⁴¹ Destinations such as Egypt and Tunisia are known as long-standing tourist destinations. In this long history, the importance of mosques as touristic places has always been recognized. Mosques have several functions. Firstly, they are used by Muslims to worship Allah. Outside prayer times, the mosque can serve as a place for other activities that attract tourists. In her research concerning “mosque tourism” Kessler made the following statement:

Mosques are central to the Muslim and Arab worlds. They are key to Muslims in the Muslim and non-Muslim world as houses of prayer and community centres. Most importantly they are symbols of Islam and are top attractions: non-Muslims visit them as key landmarks while Muslims might

⁴⁰ Carboni, Perelli and Giovanni Sistu, “Is Islamic Tourism a Viable Option,” 2.

⁴¹ On its website, the Ministry of Religious affairs makes a distinction between الجوامع and المساجد. Both are translated in English as mosques although there is a difference between both in Islam. Elaborating on the difference between both in beyond the aim of this article. Ministry of Religious Affairs, “Number of mosques and mosques approved for demarcation within the list of religious monuments upon which the state sponsors,” accessed July 23, 2020, http://www.affaires-religieuses.tn/uploads/media/stat-monuments_01.pdf.

*access their duality, as tourists or worshippers while travelling.*⁴²

2. Challenges of Halal Tourism in Tunisia

In the GMTI of 2019, Tunisia is not in the top 10 of Muslim-friendly destinations. Tunisia takes the 15th place of the OIC-countries. In neither of the four key factors, Tunisia is listed in the top 10. Halal tourism remains an underdeveloped tourism sector in Tunisia and this is due to different elements.

The first explanation is connected the overall security situation. The first developments of the tourism industry happened from Tunisia's independence onwards. Over the years, the country has been faced with political instability and chaos which led to less financial income for people working in the tourism industry. Quality cannot be upgraded due to this. The current existing resorts are faced with ageing buildings and a lot of hotel owners don't have the necessary financial capacity to restore and upgrade the quality of their hotels. The lack of funding's also prevents hotel managers of making any changes in order to make their hotel sharia compliant.

The second explanation is found in the relative novelty of the label or concept of halal tourism. In some countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia the concept of halal tourism is less new because Islamic principles had already been implemented in the tourism sector.⁴³ This hasn't been the case in other countries including Tunisia. As already stated, both Bourguiba and Ben Ali did not show the slightest interest in making Islamic principles a guideline for the development of the tourism industry. The direct financial advantages of making Tunisia an attractable touristic destination for western tourists were immediately clear. It was only after the

⁴² Kristel Kessler, "Conceptualizing Mosque Tourism: A Central Feature of Islamic and Religious Tourism," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (February 2016): 28.

⁴³ Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, "Islamic Tourism," 180.

ousting of Ben Ali in 2011 that the idea of halal tourism became more discussed. But the concept of halal tourism is still relatively new and remains criticized, again by government officials.

In 2012, Hamadi Jebali, at that time Prime Minister of Tunisia, said that there is no such thing as halal or haram tourism. In his opinion there is only tourism.⁴⁴ When in 2016 the new Tunisian tourism strategy document was published, there was no orientation towards Islamic tourism or halal tourism (the strategy didn't touch upon halal products for example and there was no interest shown in Muslim tourists apart from Libyans and Algerians).⁴⁵ One year later, Selma Elloumi, then Minister of Tourism and Handicraft, declared that halal tourism does not exist in Tunisia, at least not officially. This message was in 2018 again proclaimed by the Ministry of Tourism.⁴⁶ There are, according to estimations dating from 2018, only seven hotels in Tunisia that prohibit alcohol.⁴⁷ Such statements made by prominent politicians or governmental institutions aren't in favour of the development of halal tourism. It seems that, even after the Jasmine Revolution, political figures still wanted to hold onto the image of Tunisia being a secular, read western, country.

I have tried reaching out to different political Tunisian parties to find their current stance on this debate but only one party was able to respond. Machrou

⁴⁴ Yassin al-Atwi, "Hammadi Al-Jabali: There is no halal or forbidden in tourism," *Tunisie Numerique*, April 17, 2012, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2HSe2U6>.

⁴⁵ Carboni, Perelli and Sistu, "Is Islamic Tourism a Viable Option," 5-6.

⁴⁶ Hanan Jable, "'Halal Hotels' in Tunisia: Trade for Profit or a Scheme for the Islamization of Society?" *Hafryat*, August 13, 2018, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ndhRn0>; see also Raja Ben Slama "Raja Ben Slama writes to you: There are no halal hotels in Tunisia", *Assarih*, June 6, 2020, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/318h7xr>.

⁴⁷ "Can the 'halal' hotel experience revive tourism in Tunisia?," *Qantara*, July 9, 2018, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://ar.qantara.de/print/31949>.

Tounes is a new party founded in 2016 by Mohsen Marzouk. The party was born from a split from Nidaa Tounes and includes nationalists as well as centre-left and centre-right members. It is said that this party is in line with President Bourguiba's ideology and wants to continue modernization and democratization.⁴⁸ In the *Assembly of the Representatives of the People* (the legislative branch of the government) Machrou Tounes holds 4 seats. Concerning the meaning of halal tourism, Machrou Tounes explained that it is a niche just like others including ecological and cultural tourism but just on a smaller scale. They explained that there is a demand for this type of tourism and called Muslims making use it "often more radical in their belief". In asking whether they support the further development of halal tourism, the party said it looks at it from an economic perspective. According to the party:

*The choice to embark on this niche must be the exclusive responsibility of the investor. The institutions which have developed Islamic finance the most in the world are not institutions of Muslim countries.*⁴⁹

Following the point of view of Machrou Tounes, the further development of halal tourism is completely in the hands of investors and operators. They state that hotels are developing accommodations according to Islamic principles according to the demand they receive. The reason why Tunisia is not in the top 10 of the GMTI-rating is because Tunisian operators are not seeing halal tourism as promising. They also stated that developing halal tourism is not the responsibility of political parties because it is an economic activity. I argue, however, that political parties, their members and other government

⁴⁸ "Harakat Machrou Tounes: Mohsen Marzouk appelle à un Front républicain, » *Kapitalis*, March 20, 2016, accessed August 15, 2020, <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2016/03/20/harakat-machrou-tounes-mohsen-marzouk-appelle-a-un-front-republicain/>.

⁴⁹ Personal communication on Facebook, August 11, 2020 (author's translation).

officials have an influence. On top of that, the government in the past played an important role in the development of tourism by for example providing accommodations. Politicians are to a certain extent responsible for creating an environment that may or may not be committed to developing and diversifying the tourism industry. In the response of Machrou Tounes, the clientele of halal tourism was described as "radical in their views." Indirectly, this type of language has an influence on how the overall Tunisian society views people making use of halal tourism.

That contemporary politicians and government officials are reluctant to recognize or develop a prominent halal tourism industry can be linked to the historical discourse surrounding everyday Islamic activism and religiousness. Pious Muslims who advocated a bigger role for Islam in the everyday society have been labelled by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali as "extremists" and "a threat to Islam". Even today, a political party calls clients of halal tourism "more radical". The historical legacy of Bourguiba and Ben Ali still reverberates today. This in turn lead to a great part of Tunisians incorporating this use of language and fearing a new wave of Islamism if halal tourism is further developed.

Another element is the idea of supply and demand: most of the tourists in Tunisia are coming from European countries and are mostly not adhering Islam. According to people working in the tourism industry, there is not enough demand for halal tourism in order to invest in providing this kind of tourism.⁵⁰ To validate this argument, I tried getting in contact with several local Tunisian travel agencies. I only managed to get answers of two agencies namely Départ Travel Services and Visit Tunisia. An employee at Départ Travel Services took a positive stance towards halal tourism saying that:

⁵⁰ Carboni, Perelli and Giovanni Sistu, "Is Islamic Tourism a Viable Option," 6.

*this is a good idea as it allows practicing Muslims to be in places that meet their expectations without mixing with alcohol or anything that may contradict their beliefs. It is their right and I find that this diversifies the product in Tunisia. Everyone finds what they are looking for.*⁵¹

In his opinion, Tunisia could become one of the best destinations for halal tourism due to various reasons including the presence of halal hotels and private villas. The diversity of places of worship and the possibility to visit mausoleums were also mentioned. The employee said there is a rising demand for halal tourism. In the past, this kind of tourism was lacking because families were facing difficulties. According to him, Tunisia is not in the top 10 of the GMTI due to its historical legacy. He explained that only after 2012 this niche was developed. Tour operators are also demanding the presence of alcohol which further complicates the development of halal hotels. Of course, he said, halal tourism does not bring the same big numbers of tourists as other traditional forms of tourism does. An employee working for Visit Tunisia stated that halal tourism could be further developed as one segment of the tourism sector. Tunisia is a suitable destination for this niche but there are still difficulties with providing suitable hotels and restaurants. According to him, this explains why Tunisia is not in the top 10 of the GMTI. Their travel agency does not get a lot of demand for halal tourism.

From an economic point of view it is logical to not develop a niche for which there is not enough demand. It can also be argued, however, that Muslims of other regions (such as the Gulf region or South-Asia) aren't attracted to Tunisia due to its lack of effort in developing halal tourism. Others are worried that the current Muslim visitors such as Algerians and Libyans will restrain from visiting Tunisia. It is believed that their motivation to visit Tunisia is the presence of freedom and a liberal environment that is absent in Algeria and Libya.

⁵¹ Personnel communication to author through email, July 27, 2020.

Other employees working in the tourism sector have argued, however, that also Algerian families were asking for this form of tourism.⁵² The argument that some groups will stop visiting Tunisia can be refuted by pointing at the arrival of new groups of people.

In an online survey, I've asked people who have travelled to Tunisia a series of question including why they went to Tunisia, how their experience was, whether they would travel again to Tunisia and their opinion on Muslim-friendly or halal tourism and if this influences their image of the country and the possibility of going back to Tunisia.⁵³ The most often mentioned reasons for travelling to Tunisia were the low price, Tunisia being a suitable destination for coastal tourism, its hot weather, visiting family and lastly the influence of tour operators and their advertisement strategies. From the 19 respondents, 16 people said that they would have no problem if halal tourism is further developed. Only one respondent indicated being an opponent of halal tourism saying that she thinks halal is "disgusting" and she is not a "advocate of other cultures". The two remaining respondents gave an answer not relating to the question. This small-scaled study focusing on the experience of western tourists showed that most respondents were having either a neutral or positive stance regarding the further development of Muslim-friendly or halal tourism. People who do not adhere to any religion or a religion other than Islam, are still showing respect and empathy to the needs of Muslims. This study aimed to question people who have already visited Tunisia, which will have an influence on the responses. People who have visited countries with another culture and state religion are maybe more open to accept other cultures. Anyhow, the answers given contribute to a better understanding of

⁵² Mohammed ben Rajab, "Halal tourism flourishes in Tunisia," *Erem News*, August 2nd, 2015, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://www.eremnews.com/entertainment/324301>.

⁵³ This survey has been answered by 19 people. Most respondent had the Belgian nationality and were non-religious.

the positions from people living in a non-Muslim majority country towards halal tourism.

When being asked whether they would travel again to Tunisia, 7 respondents said that they wouldn't due to various reasons. Some indicated bad experiences with whom they had come into contact. Another respondent did not like the hotel nor the food. One respondent feels that she has done everything she could and there is nothing more left to do. The security situation was also mentioned by one respondent by saying that "there is too much trouble," meaning political instability. One respondent indicated that his main motive to visit Tunisia was for its beaches. He said that "Tunisia is more of a sun holiday. This doesn't appeal to me now. I would not go to Tunisia again, even without halal tourism."⁵⁴ Not one respondent changed their positive answer of going back if halal tourism would become more developed in Tunisia. Respondents were also asked whether their overall opinion or image of Tunisia would change if the country choose to further develop this niche. 13 respondents clearly indicated that their image of Tunisia would not change, and three respondents said that it would. One person did not know whether it would have an influence and the two remaining respondents gave an answer not relating to the question.

Although this survey was only small-scaled and lacks representativeness, it does shed light on why the respondents choose to travel to Tunisia. The results support the earlier claim made by academics that Tunisia is mostly chosen because of its coastal tourism. As anticipated, travel agencies also played a role in promoting Tunisia. The survey showed that being non-Muslim does not automatically mean a resistance towards the further development of Muslim-friendly or halal tourism, not in Tunisia and most probably not in other countries. In other words, the further development of halal tourism in Tunisia does not necessarily mean

⁵⁴ Author's translation.

that non-Muslim western tourists will abstain from travelling to Tunisia as is often implied, especially not if other forms of tourism keep being offered. Only a minority of the respondents indicated that their image of Tunisia would change if the country invests more in halal tourism.

3. The opportunities for Halal Tourism

It is safe to say that only recently the concept of halal tourism was introduced in Tunisia. The country has opportunities in developing halal tourism. Many places are suitable for Muslim travellers, this is of course linked to Tunisia being a Muslim majority country. The biggest advantage for the development of halal tourism in Tunisia is the fact that there is a demand for it. Families holding firmly on to Islamic principles weren't keen on residing in many of the existing hotels due to the presence of alcohol, nudity and loud western music. They are a demanding group for accommodations such as halal hotels or "hotels only for families". Some hotel owners have in the light of tourism decline adapted their hotels to become halal or sharia compliant. One owner had seven hotels but only three of them were in use. After being approached by a travel agency, he agreed on transforming one of his hotels to being "a halal hotel". With this approach he could compensate the decline in bookings by focusing on Tunisian families.⁵⁵ This interest in halal tourism in Tunisia is also visible on social media platforms such as Facebook.⁵⁶

Another advantage of developing halal tourism is noticed by some employees working in the tourism industry. They deem halal tourism as a tool to diversify the tourism sector. When Tunisia is more recognized as a prominent destination for halal tourism, the country

⁵⁵ Basma Barakat, "Halal hotels for veiled women in Tunisia," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, July 30, 2015, accessed August 1st, 2020, <https://bit.ly/317ghBe>.

⁵⁶ For example *Halal Tourism in Tunisia*, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Tourisme.Halal.Tunisie/>.

can move away from its overdependence on western tourists.⁵⁷ An interviewee of a study conducted by Carboni, Perelli and Sistu made the following statement:

*Halal tourism exists in the world and can be an option. It could attract tourists from Muslim countries, such as the UAE and Egypt, and it could also prove successful between Tunisians, especially in the family tourism sector. An offer closer to Muslim sensibilities would be a great stimulus for domestic tourism.*⁵⁸

The growth in popularity of halal tourism in Tunisia can be understood in different ways. Whether halal tourism is a form of post-Islamism, Islamic piety or religious commodification depends on how, why and by which actors it is introduced. Halal tourism has been understood in the past as a form of post-Islamism because some actors see it as a means to bring Islam into both the public and private sphere. They want to see the Tunisian society penetrated with Islam and society has to be organised along the lines of religious rules. Introducing halal tourism can thus contribute to their goals. However, halal tourism is also a form of Muslim or Islamic piety. As observed, there is a demand coming from Muslims to develop halal tourism because they want to adhere to Islam also while travelling. When travelling in Tunisia, domestic tourists are confronted with international services that aren't compliant with their religious rules such as the presence of nudity and intersexual relationships. Residing in "sharia compliant hotels" is for them a sign of Islamic piety. Halal tourism is thus not about wanting the whole Tunisian society to change. They rather focus on their own beliefs and religious experiences. Developing halal tourism can also be seen as a form of religious commodification. People working in the tourism industry, such as hotel owners or tourist agencies, see developing halal tourism as a means of generating more profits. It has been indicated that in

⁵⁷ Carboni, Perelli and Sistu, "Developing Tourism Products," 99.

⁵⁸ Carboni, Perelli and Sistu, "Is Islamic Tourism a Viable Option," 4.

Tunisia, hotels were converted to “family only” or “halal hotel” in order to bridge the decline in western tourists and to overcome hotels being empty.

Inclusion of the Tunisian Population in the Debate around Halal Tourism

As part of this research paper, I have conducted my own survey focussing on the local Tunisian population. This survey, both in French and English, has been filled in by a total of 46 respondents. Eight respondents indicated having a double nationality. Almost all respondents identified themselves as Muslim except for 5 people (4 called themselves non-religious and one person said he is agnostic). In this survey I asked the respondents what they understood under the concept of halal tourism, their opinion on this concept, whether they are looking for halal options when travelling and whether they deem Tunisia a suitable destination for halal tourism. Two other questions focussed on the Tunisian society in general and the role of political leaders in the development of halal tourism. Lastly, I also asked why, according to them, Tunisia is not in the top 10 of the GMTI.

Concerning the concept of halal tourism, there was a lot of attention to the same specific aspects. Most respondents focused on food and beverages by mentioning the prohibition of alcohol and pork. Another often mentioned aspect was the acceptance of a wearing a hijab or burkini. The aspect of gender separation has been mentioned 8 times, especially in connection with swimming pools. Only three respondents mentioned the availability of praying facilities. Besides only mentioning some aspects, some respondents gave a very general definition of halal tourism for example: “tourism according to the rules and bases of life given by Allah” or tourism that “follows the rules and regulations of the Kuran and Sunnah.” Concluding the concept of halal tourism, respondents either gave a very general description of this kind of tourism or had a very narrow image concentrating mostly

on food and beverages, gender separation and the allowance of an “Islamic” dressing code.

Secondly the opinion of the respondents was measured concerning halal tourism. A little more than half of the respondents had a positive stance towards halal tourism, calling it a necessity, a nice idea or a big plus. Another significant proportion of the respondents had a neutral attitude towards the concept, 14 in total. They either expressed having no opinion or seeing it just like any other type of tourism product. Two respondents indicated that it is nice to have the option to choose between halal tourism and other kinds. Seven respondents were overtly negative in their stance towards halal tourism calling it “bullshit”, “cringe” or discriminating. Classified as a negative reaction is for example the following opinion:

It does not suit Tunisia’s modern image and generally speaking, creating “special needs” groups only creates division. Stamping it with “halal” would mean that anything diverging from that should be considered “haram”?

The third important question aimed to measure whether the local population are customers of halal tourism. 20 respondents clearly indicated that they are actively looking for halal options while travelling, while 22 said they don’t. The remaining respondents sometimes did and at other times did not. Some respondents explained their personal choice for opting for halal tourism by saying they feel more comfortable if they could swim in gender separated pools. Others feel uncomfortable around people drinking alcohol, one respondent even said its forbidden to be around someone who drinks alcohol. Another respondent had negative experiences in a few hotels and wants to avoid these by no longer going to “non-Muslim-friendly hotels”. One respondent chose to not opt for halal tourism because he is interested in meeting people with a different culture. In his opinion, everything connected to the label of “Muslim-friendly” is for “radical worshipers”.

Respondents were also asked whether Tunisia is a suitable country for halal tourism or not. Most respondents clearly said yes or no while only a couple of respondents were having doubts. There were as many respondents answering yes as no. Respondents deeming Tunisia a suitable destination for halal tourism had several reasons. Most of them related their answer to Tunisia being a Muslim-majority country where Islamic guidelines are already followed according to them. Another reason given was the presence of many Islamic monuments and the openness of the country. Only a few respondents were in doubt or gave an answer not relating to the question. Tunisians deeming their country not to be suitable for halal tourism explained this by referring to the general mentality of the Tunisians. They made statements like “Tunisians want to be like European people”, or “the mind of most Tunisians does not fit with halal tourism”. One respondent made a connection with policies taken in the past:

No, never been and most probably will not be. Tunisia encouraged women to remove any head cover and will not take a step back. Personal choices are allowed but Tunisia is not a country that will develop and invest in this type of tourism.

In asking why they think Tunisia is not in the GMTI top 10, most respondents made a reference to the religiousness or piousness of the Tunisian populations. It was said that Tunisians, in general, are seeing themselves more as western than as Muslim and are less religious than Muslims in other Muslim-majority countries. Others indicated that providing halal tourism is not a priority. Most efforts have been made to satisfy non-Muslim European tourists instead of Tunisians citizens asking for halal tourism. In their focus on Europeans, they are forgetting about Muslims. A lack in marketing strategies has also been mentioned by a few respondents. There is a general lack in agencies as well as accommodations specialized in halal tourism. Two respondents mentioned the influence of political and economic instability due to

terrorist attacks and other acts of violence. The advanced situation in other countries was mentioned by one respondent.

Half of the respondents said that the Tunisian society in general does not support the development of halal tourism. Some of the reasons are again related to the religiousness of the Tunisian population. Some said that gender separation is viewed by most Tunisians as a lack of modernity and that consuming alcohol and nudity is a sign of being modern and western. When hearing the word tourism, Tunisians think about disco's, bars and nightclubs according to another respondent. Only 11 respondents said that the Tunisian society supports the development of halal tourism. The remaining respondents were unsure whether the Tunisian society in general supports this kind of tourism. One respondent thinks society does but hotel owners don't, another respondent indicated a tension between people according to their religion:

Despite Tunisia being a majority Muslim country, over the past years more and more people have distanced themselves from Islam. I think Muslims are still supportive of this kind of tourism, while non-Muslims aren't. Therefore, leading to a division. This causes me to believe that I cannot argue whether the Tunisian society as a whole is supportive or not.

The last question was connected to the role that politicians play, according to them, in the development of halal tourism. Although a lot of respondents were in doubt, the general opinion is that leaders and other politicians have not played a considerable role in developing halal tourism. Some said that politicians who are supportive of this niche, are scared to put it forward in public. Others indicated that probably Ennahda would be in favour of it. Political leaders are not investing or providing support for halal tourism like for example Turkey. This is because they are prioritizing "western tourism" which is financially more

interesting. One respondent, however, said the political leaders have played a big role but rather in a negative way:

In my opinion, none of the former presidents were openly Muslim. They did not support Muslims in the country in any way (for example burqa ban, in the past, even a hijab ban). They were busy de-Islamizing the country to make it more and more appealing and likeable to countries like the U.S. and France. Therefore, halal tourism had no value to them at all. The current president is openly Muslim, but as there are many problems in the country right now, I doubt halal tourism is a priority.

It seems to be true that most prominent political parties in Tunisia do not seem to support the development of halal tourism. Rida al-Shekandali, former Professor of Economics at Carthage University of Economic Sciences and Management, said that “halal tourism has not been officially adopted by the state or embraced as part of any economic strategy by the Ministry of Tourism as is the case in other Muslim countries, such as Turkey.”⁵⁹ He also claimed that Nidaa Tounes and other left-winged parties are against this form of tourism. From the political parties who have an influence in shaping policies, only Ennahda seems openly supporting halal tourism. And indeed, In 2018, Rachid Gannouchi, founder of Ennahda, was the person inaugurating a new halal hotel in Hammamet.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that halal tourism in Tunisia was and remains an underdeveloped form of

⁵⁹ “Can the “halal” hotel experience revive tourism in Tunisia?,” *Qantara*, July 9, 2018, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://ar.qantara.de/print/31949>; “Can Halal hotels boost Tunisia’s ailing tourism sector?” *Travel Tourism News*, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://traveltourism.news/can-dry-hotels-boost-tunisia-ailing-tourism-sector/>.

⁶⁰ Hanan Jable, ““Halal Hotels” in Tunisia: Trade for Profit or a Scheme for the Islamization of Society?” *Hafryat*, August 13, 2018, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ncOj8R>.

tourism compared to other forms. To a large extent, this observation can be explained by looking at the political context in Tunisia. The development of tourism cannot be separated from governmental policies in the past as well as contemporary policies. The first two presidents, Bourguiba and Ben Ali were keen on attracting European and North American travellers and turned their back against Islamic activism. Especially Ben Ali and his entourage had a major influence on how the tourism sector was developed given it was under their direct control. As shown, the Jasmine Revolution did not bring a radical break from the past when it comes to how the tourism sector is developed. Although after the revolution, there was more openness for the expression of religiousness, the historical legacy of Bourguiba and Ben Ali still has a looming impact on the tourism industry. Developing halal tourism is still not part of an official government policy like other forms of tourism. The Ministry of Tourism was in 2018 still denying the existence of halal tourism or halal hotels. Everyone involved in developing the tourism industry, however, should explore the opportunities halal tourism has to offer without neglecting the sensitivities and difficulties connected to it. So far, as has been indicated by Tunisians, the tourism industry is still mostly focused on attracting and satisfying European tourists. This is not illogical given the fact that Europeans are said to make up the bulk of the international tourists in Tunisia. This does entail that its tourism industry remains over independent on western tourists which in turn leads to vulnerability.

Although I have focused in this research paper on the influence of the Tunisian political context, this is not the only reason for the underdevelopment of halal tourism. Another influence is found looking at the international, global context. In the past, Tunisia has not been able to organize its own tour operators and therefore depended on the already existing tour operators mostly French, German and Scandinavian. The downside of this is obvious. The existing tour operators of course insisted that countries developed a tourism industry which would satisfy their

European clients. International tour operators still tend to put forward the image of Tunisia as a country for coastal tourism offering package deals.

Advocating a more diverse tourism industry in Tunisia, including the further development of halal tourism, does not mean breaking down other, already highly developed, forms of tourism. It can be understood as a means to diversify the tourism industry and strengthening the portfolio of non-western tourism operators. Maybe it can contribute to a balance between local, intraregional and international tourists. I argue that for the future economy of Tunisia it is beneficial to extend its commercial strategy and markets. As seen in other countries, halal tourism can generate a considerable amount of additional profits. It said in the GMTI that Muslim travellers are becoming one of the fastest growing segments of the global tourism industry. This tourism sector is an effective way of encouraging new target audiences to come to a country as well as integrating its own inhabitants looking for this type of tourism who are currently not heard enough. In other words, halal tourism may contribute to the development of the much-needed domestic tourism. Halal tourism can also be a solution for the declining numbers of western visitors and to overcome Tunisia's dependence on the arrival of these tourists as a result of political instability or the current situation of a pandemic. Opting for developing halal tourism, however, does not mean ignoring the challenges and sensitivities connected to the debate.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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