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Conceptualizing Mosque Tourism: A Central Feature of Islamic and Religious Tourism

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The increasing size of the worldwide Muslim population and the modernization of Arab countries on the international scene reinforce the rising trend of Islamic Tourism. Indeed, Islamic Tourism has gained much interest in recent years and is considered to be a very promising niche in the near future. This fairly new concept can simply be defined as intra-Muslim and intra-Arab tourism and considering Muslim countries are an emerging tourism market, this is a product with significant economic potential. It is also viewed as tourism that respects Islamic religious principles and is consequently referred to as “Halal Tourism”. In addition, it includes tourists travelling for religious purposes such as those performing the Islamic pilgrimage of Hajj. Consequently, defining Islamic Tourism is a complex matter, that can be broad or narrow, as it can be defined by its type of tourist, its place of travel, its purpose of travel and way of travel. Furthermore, it is important not to omit the cultural aspects of Islamic tourism that this paper will primarily focus on; the paper considers Islamic cultural tourism sites and attractions as another element of this trend, referring to Islamic tourism in its choice of tourist activities. Indeed, Islamic and Arabic culture, heritage and history are displayed and interpreted in order to allow the visitor to discover and understand Muslims, their beliefs and way of life while facilitating their leisurely entertainment and satisfying their tourist curiosity. In this context, this paper offers to define the concept of Mosque Tourism, a term which is inexistent in the current academic literature as well as to propose a justification of its importance as a tourist activity and a central element of Islamic tourism that should be focused on to promote a sustainable growth of this new tourist trend. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is to describe and define Islamic Tourism by reviewing the tourism literature in order to give a meaning to the term Mosque Tourism, which is one of the most important activities undertaken by Muslim tourists as a religious practice as well as a tourist activity while travelling.

Key Words: Islamic tourism, mosque tourism, halal tourism, Muslims.

Introduction

Scholars have published significant literature on the relationship of tourism and Islam in recent years (Al-Hamamreh & Steiner, 2004; Aziz, 2001; Battour, Ismail & Battor, 2010a, 2010b; Din, 1989; Sanad et al., 2010; Stephenson, 2014; Timothy & Iverson, 2006; Zamanifarahani & Henderson, 2010). When considering Islam, it is important to present its principles but also its followers. Muslims currently represent 23% of the global population, which total at about 1.6 billion Muslims in 2010 and is expected to rise to 2.2 billion by 2030. The largest number of Muslims can be found in Asia (60%) or in the Middle East and North Africa (20%), while significant Muslim minorities are recorded in other regions / countries: Europe (38.1 million), USA (8 million) and Canada (1 million) to name just a few (Asif, 2011; Pew Forum, 2011).

Consequently, Muslims are growing in numbers worldwide; they are perceived as a valid consumer group and represent a market with significant buying power, especially when considering the spending power of consumers from Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and UAE. Marketers have recognized their significance and have acknowledged their specific needs and requirements as a distinctive market, which is heavily led by faith. Indeed, Islam has an important place in Muslims’ life regardless of their religiosity level. The principles of Islam provide followers with clear guidelines to live their life while fully embracing their beliefs, following certain rituals, whereby their spiritual and secular live are united under the Sharia Law. Muslim communities and their rituals are often misunderstood because of negative media headlines linking Islam to terrorist attacks or terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, ISIL or DAESH, who even
though are unrepresentative of Islam and its teachings, proclaim themselves as The Islamic State, while following an extreme interpretation of Sharia Law through violence. This has had the effect of associating Islam with violence, crimes and anti-western ideologies. Consequently, Muslims and Muslim countries are often misjudged and feared. This has huge impacts on the Tourism map and reorganized the holiday destinations of Western tourists as well as Muslim tourists. Indeed, Western tourists have increasingly selected non-Muslim destinations, especially after September 11th and the Arab Spring while at the same time, Muslim tourists feeling targeted decide to travel regionally and turn to neighbouring countries or other Muslim countries. Intra-Arab and Intra-Muslim travels have created and reinforced the concept of Islamic Tourism. Accordingly, Tourism developers have joined in by promoting and developing tourism and leisure products specifically targeted at Muslim communities, leading to the concept of Islamic Tourism.

Islamic tourism is a growing trend, which is still characterized by a certain ambiguity and lacks proper definition and clear concepts (Hamza, Chouhoud & Tantawi, 2012; Henderson, 2010; Neveu, 2010; Jafari & Scott, 2013) as it involves Muslims, non-Muslims, Arab destinations and religious travels just to name a few of its features. Accordingly, this paper aims to clearly define Islamic tourism. To do so, we will firstly try to understand Muslim communities and their lifestyle, detailing their requirements and religious needs as well as exploring the various components of Islamic Tourism taking Muslims at the starting point for this definition. Secondly, we will demonstrate that the common link of all the components and the focal point for all Muslims is the Mosque as a building but also as a function in order to create and legitimate the term “Mosque Tourism”. This paper will authenticate Mosque Tourism as a central feature of Islamic Tourism and present it as a sustainable tool for Halal Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Religious Tourism and a focal point of Muslim tourists.

### Muslim Communities

The term “Muslim” refers to a person who follows the religion of Islam, which is one of the three main Monotheist religions with Judaism and Christianity. Köeing, McCullough & Larson (2001:18) defined religion as

an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality).

Consequently, religion is a very personal matter with the degree of practice varying greatly from one follower to another depending on one’s level of religiosity (Delener, 1994; Essoo & Dibb, 2004; Sood & Nasu, 1995). Religion and human civilisation have a close relationship they both often define a nation, its values, its institutions and its people (Fam, Waller & Erdogan, 2004; Vukonic, 1996). Religiosity is another important notion in spirituality that is often mistaken with religion. The difference lies in the fact that religion is a continuum of commitment and beliefs representing a particular faith, while religiosity involves the level of importance and assiduity that one is willing to apply to the practice of his religion (Eid & El-Gobary, 2015; Weaver & Agle, 2002). We can therefore argue that religion shaped the world but that religiosity focuses on the followers’ daily life by shaping their attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, rituals and how they want to utilize them to give meaning to their existence and life in general (Eid & El-Gobary, 2015). Consequently, religion and religiosity are powerful in influencing human behaviour and decisions as well as potentially having significant impacts on Tourism development and tourists’ selections (Delener, 1994; Essoo & Dibb, 2004; Sood & Nasu, 1995).

Muslim communities are diverse and complex, depending on the country they are based in, the branch of Islam that they follow but also cultural, social, historical and personal variables. However, they agree on certain aspects, which define their beliefs and practices. The Quran, the Sunnah and Sharia Law are three crucial elements in the lives of Muslim and the organization of their communities:

**The Quran** is the holy book corresponding to Islam, which is considered to be the verbatim word of God as revealed to their main Prophet: Muhammad. The Quran is more than a religious or holy book; it is a manual for life for all Muslims.

**The Sunnah**, is comprised of hadiths, which are collections of reports of teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and finally;

**Sharia Law**, significant in Muslims’ religious and secular practices, which are inextricable (Frishman & Khan, 2002; Ibrahim, 1997; Newby, 2002).
Indeed, the particularity of Islam is that religious and secular beliefs and domains are completely linked and fused with each other, which is very well illustrated by Sharia Law. “Sharia” originally meant “path leading to the water”, which really has to be understood as “way to the source of life”. Sharia Law is comprehensive and touches on all human activities by combining Western civil and criminal law whereby human actions are categorized as obligatory, meritorious, indifferent, reprehensible and forbidden (Frishman & Khan, 2002). These have an important place in Islam as they guide the daily life of Muslims by providing a clear code of conduct to adopt in many areas (Saeed et al., 2011). Officially this is an Islamic legal system derived from the Quran and the Hadith. Consequently, Islam has a strong influence on its followers’ life, as it is omnipresent and transcendent. It basically affects their spiritual and secular life by impacting on their way of life as individuals, communities and consumers.

Finally, Muslims strictly follow the five pillars of Islam, which are:

- Acceptance of the Shahada, a declaration that proclaims that “there is no God but God (and) Muhammad is the messenger of God”.
- Performing five Salat (prayers) a day.
- The act of Zakat which consists of donating 2.5% of annual income to charity.
- The act of Sawm (fasting), particularly during the holy month of Ramadan, which consists of abstaining from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset. All Muslims are required to fast during the 9th lunar month of the Islamic calendar.
- Undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca (Muhammad’s birthplace) from the age of puberty at least once in a person’s life if one is physically and financially fit to do so.

Whether followers have a high or low level of religiosity, the five pillars are key to all Muslims and summarize clearly their beliefs but also their duties (Ali, 2003; Frishman & Khan, 2002; Ibrahim, 1997; Newby, 2002)

Muslims have been recognized to be a growing market and are now clearly labelled as consumers, consequently branding and marketing to gain and retain the Muslim market is required. As Power & Abdullah (2009) mention, Muslim consumers want brands that speak to them. Accordingly, branding for Muslim tourists should follow religious principles, enshrined in sharia law, which can be seen as an Islamic code of life establishing a social structure and providing moral guidelines for daily activities. This clearly states what is permissible or Halal and what is forbidden or Haram (Al Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Henderson, 2003; Sanad, Kassem & Scott, 2010; Stephenson, 2014). We have established that religion is an active element of Muslim Consumers’ choices; logically impacting on their tourist choices. Indeed, Islam consciously or unconsciously affects their selection of activities, transportation modes, accommodations, attractions and restaurants.

The second most influential element in their tourist choices is linked to the worldwide geopolitical climate. Islam and Muslims have been at the centre of many media headlines, often of a negative nature as they are often associated with conservatism, fanatics, oppression, terrorism and anti-Western sentiment (Armstrong, 2001; Henderson, 2003). September 11th attacks, The April 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, Boko Haram massacres and ISIS crimes [and most recently the November 13th, 2015 attacks in Paris] have been linked to Islam and Islam followers in the media, creating Anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim tendencies, which have been recorded by many scholars (Al Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Henderson, 2003). These tendencies can be referred to as “Islamophobia”, which is defined as an irrational fear of Muslims, hatred of Islam and hostile behaviour to Arab and/or Muslim individuals and communities. This growing anti-Muslim sentiment has a communitarianism effect, as Muslim communities feel unsafe and targeted and prefer to congregate within the Muslim sphere. This is directly affecting their residential, employment, education, social, leisure and travel choices (Stephenson & Ali, 2010).

Even though, this phenomenon focuses on Muslim communities, it affects all countries as Muslim communities are growing in number and are located in all continents, but also because they are a powerful market which is in constant growth and holds such significant purchasing power. For instance, in the Travel and Tourism industry, Muslims as a market represent US$126.1 billion, which was 12.3% of the total global outbound tourism market for 2011. The Middle East and North Africa markets represent 60% of the total global Muslim tourist outbound expenditure in 2011, with Saudi Arabia as number one, followed by Iran, UAE, Indonesia and Kuwait. In
recent times, these Muslim tourists are changing their travel habits and redirecting their choices toward Muslim friendly destinations, enabling them an easy access to halal friendly products and services but also to guarantee a genuine feeling of safety and freedom to be themselves on holidays, running away from the increasing Islamophobia.

Even tough, Islam is often perceived as a rather strict and rigorous religion involving many constraints, it is important to realise that Islam and tourism are compatible. Indeed Islam is not opposed to tourism as the act of travelling, which can nowadays be associated with the notion of Tourism, is clearly mentioned in several chapters of the Quran (Surah). Actually, travelling is explicitly encouraged and is perceived as a tool to acquire knowledge and contemplate the beauties of the World under certain conditions; this is why the acts of Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca, which is one of the five pillar of Islam), Umrah (Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina) and Ziyarat (other religiously motivated trips to mosques, graves, caves or battlefields) are of great importance in Islam (Aziz, 1995; Hamza et al., 2012; Henderson, 2003; Scott & Jafari, 2010; Zamani Farahani & Henderson, 2010). At the origin, travelling was a mean to spread Islam peacefully (Sanad, Kassem & Scott, 2010). Currently, travel is portrayed as a means to obtain experience and maturity in life’s affairs. Consequently, Muslims are encouraged to travel for historical, social and cultural encounters to mingle with others, to spread God’s word and to contemplate God’s creations (Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Travel reinforces the bond of Muslim Fraternity among the Muslim community called Ummah (Al-Amin, 2002; Bhardwaj, 1998; Eickleman & Piscatori, 1990; Henderson, 2003; Kessler, 1992).

It is also important to mention that Islam is not incompatible with Muslim countries welcoming tourists from other countries and religions (Carboni et al., 2014), however conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Brunei or Iran have developed tourism mainly focusing on Muslim travel in order to preserve their cultural and religious values as well as limiting the potential immoral influences that Western tourism might have on the local communities (Aziz, 1995; Baum & Conlin, 1997; Din, 1989; Mansfeld & Winckler, 2008; Mathieson & Wall, 1990; Ritter, 1975; Robinson & Meaton, 2005; Sadi & Henderson, 2005; Zamani Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Indeed, in the Quran, it is mentioned that the traveller should be treated with compassion, as

the conduct of Prophet Muhammad, both as host and guest, enjoins traits of humility, compassion, and a magnanimous degree of tolerance. Travellers, as the Prophet repeatedly said, must be accorded with the most selfless generosity (Din, 1989:18)

implying that welcoming tourists in one’s country is permitted and charitable. Consequently The Quran permits Muslims to travel to Muslim and non-Muslim countries for entertainment, religious and educational purposes as well as allowing Muslim countries to host tourists whether they are Muslims or not. Frequently, Western Tourism is associated with lavishness, permissiveness and decadence, which can be in contradiction to some of the Islamic principles and way of life. Consequently, Islamic Tourism, which is a fairly recent and emerging concept seems like a positive alternative to the hedonic westernized interpretation of tourism (Sonmez, 2001:127). Thus, the relationship that tourism has with Islam is complex as well as the ways that Islam influences tourism. This is why creating tourism products responding to the Muslim communities’ needs is not an easy task and involves tangible and intangible elements, which can be classified under the broad concept of Islamic Tourism (Battour et al., 2011; Henderson, 2010; Weidenfeld & Ron, 2008).

Islamic Tourism

Due to the adverb “Islamic”, Islamic Tourism is usually perceived as a type of tourism involving Islam and/or Muslim Travellers. Thus, Islamic Tourism typically describes Muslim tourists travelling to destinations where Islam is the official or dominant faith, often for reasons connected to religion (Organization of the Islamic Conference, 2008). However, this is a rather simplistic definition as the concept of Islamic Tourism incorporates various aspects combining Muslims, Islam and Tourism; thus becoming a complex and broader notion that requires further exploration (Henderson, 2009). The Islamic Tourism Center (ITC) defines Islamic tourism as
any activity, event, experience or indulgence undertaken in a state of travel that is in accordance with Islam (ITC, Malaysia)

This can involve people of the Muslim faith who are interested in maintaining their personal religious habits whilst travelling without restricting such travel to exclusively religious travel or Muslim countries. Indeed, it can be defined as any travel undertaken by Muslims for whom the main motivation might not be exclusively religion (Henderson, 2009).

Scott and Jafari (2010) define it as travel for a Muslim, for whom religion is an important consideration, albeit not necessarily a prime motivation (Henderson, 2010: 247).

The definition has also been expanded to include non-Muslim tourists who are interested in Islam as well as those who simply travel to the Muslim world (Al-Hamarneh, 2004; ITC, 2013; Neveu, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

We can therefore refine the definition of Islamic Tourism to the following propositions:
- Muslims Travelling to any destinations
- Muslims Travelling to Muslim Countries
- Muslims Travelling for religious purposes
- Muslims Travelling while following Islamic principles
- Muslims Travelling to discover Arab / Muslim Heritage
- Non-Muslims Travelling to Muslim destinations
- Non-Muslims Travelling in order to understand Islam and Arab Culture

Ironically on the morning of September 11th terrorist attack, a new bilingual Arab/English magazine on cultural tourism was presented at a UNESCO conference in Syria entitled “Islamic Tourism”, which Al Hamarneh and Steiner (2004:8) have summarized in 3 points:
- The revival of Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values
- Economic benefit for Islamic societies
- The strengthening of Islamic self-confidence, identity and beliefs in the face of negative stereotyping in comparison to other cultures and lifestyles

The major themes of that publication constitute the basis of our definition and characterization of Islamic Tourism. The comprehension of what Islamic tourism represents is reflected in the axes presented below:

**Economic Axis:**
This axis portrays Muslims and Arabs as a niche market composed of specific consumers in need of certain services and products based on their religion, their religiosity and their habits. This notion has strong links with the geo-political climate that created this consumer group.

**Geographic Axis:**
This axis presents Muslim and Arab countries as an emerging market composed of several markets: Arab countries with a long tradition of tourism development, Arab countries that recently opened to tourism, Muslim countries predominantly in Asia and Africa but also in Europe who are actively developing Islamic Tourism.

**Religious Axis:**
This axis refers to a conservative understanding and rigorous interpretation of Islam applied to tourism, which will present new tourism options and spheres. It shares similarities with Community Tourism and is often synonym with Halal Tourism.

**Cultural Axis:**
This axis primarily involves Islamic/Arabic Culture and Heritage as well as self-confidence and pride building.

These axes are inter-connected. Indeed the geo-political climate impacts on the geographic and religious axes, facilitated by a favourable economic axis, which is at the basis of Islamic Tourism’s creation. The cultural axis follows as a logical element reinforcing the Islamic Tourism concept. Indeed, growing Islamophobia and the emergence of a Muslim market with significant buying power has the effect of increasing intra-Arab and intra-Muslim travels in order to allow Muslim communities to enjoy holidays following Islamic principles as well as being able to discover Muslim and Arab Heritage. The above axes will be explored in the following sections in order to fully comprehend their importance as well as discovering their links.
Islamic Tourism as a Market

Islam is considered to be the fastest growing religion with an increasing number of followers in all major countries and cities. This growth represents a distinct market and defines a particular consumer. Indeed, Muslim consumers are one of the fastest growing markets and with an estimation of US$126 billion global revenue from Muslim tourists in 2011, represents almost twice the global revenue of China and is forecasted to grow by 4.79% annually for the next eight years (Dinar Standard and Crescentrating LLC, 2012; Stephenson, 2014).

The Muslim market is heterogeneous and is often referred to as Muslim markets in order to emphasise its internal diversity and richness (Al-Hamarneh, 2005). The increasing number and power of Muslim consumers has caught the attention of professionals, who have understood the need to create and market appropriate tourism products and facilities to fit this growing market’s requirements and expectations (Eid, 2013; Prayag & Hosany, 2014). The Muslim market is a complex and diverse one with a particularity, which lies in the religion that groups them together: Islam. For Muslims, Islam is omnipresent and actually organizes and often defines a country, its inhabitants, their customs and lives (Aziz, 1995; Eid, 2013; Hassan, 2007). Indeed, Islam is transcendent and has important impacts on secular and spiritual elements of a country and its citizens. Thus, it influences politics, economics, culture and society (Henderson, 2003; Hodge, 2002; Stephenson, 2014). In addition, even though all Muslims follow the same holy book (Quran) and the preaching of the prophet Muhammad, the level of practice, religiosity and interpretation is different from country to country and obviously from person to person within a country (Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010) which highlights the multiplicity of this market.

Islamic branding combines cultural but essentially religious attributes that characterise Muslim needs, beliefs and consumption patterns (Power & Abdullah, 2009), based on sharia law and the Quran. Consequently, Islamic branding is often synonym with Halal Branding. Halal brands are designed according to strict Islamic principles reflecting what is permitted. This does not only refer to food but also what is permitted in terms of cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, logistics, clothing, finance, hospitality and even banking (Alserhan, 2010; Cleveland, Laroche & Hallab, 2013; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; Minkus-McKenna, 2007; Power & Abdullah, 2009). Indeed, Muslim consumer and tourist choices heavily depend on Islamic principles, which guide their selection. For instance tourist activity, destination, hotel, tours and transportation will be affected by beliefs and requirements necessary to perform religious rituals. Consequently, Sharia Compliant Hotels, halal brands and Muslim-friendly destinations are developing significantly in the tourism and hospitality industries (Prayag & Hosany, 2014).

Information and advice are now available online or via social media to notify Muslim consumers and tourists of services, products and facilities that might be of interest to them. Websites such as Eat Halal, Green Zahiba, Halal Healthy, Halal Focus.com or mobile applications like Halal Trip and Muslim Pro enable Muslim consumers to be updated on halal friendly products and services worldwide (Stephenson, 2014). Crescentrating.com, is an information based website created in 2006 which references but also ranks halal hotels, halal resorts, halal restaurants and Islamic cultural sites to provide a comprehensive halal data base (Stephenson, 2014). The development of Islamic related tourism products to satisfy Muslim consumers has been labelled Tourism Islamization (Battour et al., 2011; Jafari & Scott, 2013; Scott & Jafari, 2010), which is an active component of Islamic Tourism and often takes the form of Halal Tourism, which will be detailed later.

Islamic Tourism as Destinations

Muslim destinations are sites, regions, countries, which follow Islam or that, are composed of a large majority of Muslims (Figure 1) while Arab destinations are countries belonging to the Arab world and usually also predominantly follow Islam (Figure 2). Such tourist destinations have developed tourism in order to welcome western tourists, Muslim tourists and sometimes both types of tourists. Consequently, the type of activities, attractions and tourist planning structure differ between these countries.

Arab countries engaging in tourism planning and marketing are divided in two groups (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Henderson, 2003) but this does not include Muslim destinations outside of the Arab World:

- Traditional tourist destinations: Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia.

Figure 2: The Arab World

http://imgarcade.com/1/arab-map/
Newly developed markets: The Gulf States

Recent jihadist attacks have put a strain on the tourism industry, which has been very unstable since September 11th and strengthened with the Arab Spring (Al-Hamarneh, 2013; Avraham, 2015; Masetti, Korner, Forster & Friedman, 2013). In an effort to increase safety, some countries have introduced new travel regulations and have changed visa obtaining procedures for some Arab countries, creating obstacles to travel to Western tourist destinations (Timothy & Iverson, 2006). The tourism industry in Arab countries managed to avoid the worldwide collapse as Arab and Muslim Tourists decided to refrain from travelling to their regular European and North American destinations, where they sensed a general feeling of hostility towards the Arab world and Islam. Instead, they chose to travel regionally in Muslim countries where they felt understood and safe. This enabled Arab countries’ national tourism industries to stabilize and in some instances even to grow (Al Hamarneh, 2005; Al Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Henderson, 2003; Kalesar, 2010; Stephenson & Ali, 2010).

Arab countries have engaged in different tourism planning strategies depending on the date they started to develop tourism as part of their national economy, the markets they were trying to attract, the types of tourism promoted, the level of conservativeness of the country in relation to Islam and their government (Al Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Henderson, 2003). According to Al Hamarneh & Steiner (2004:175) the type of tourism promoted (leisure, cultural, religious, medical, shopping etc.) and the countries of tourists’ origin concentrates on four axes of tourism development:

- European & North American oriented leisure tourism (Tunisia)
- Arab-oriented leisure tourism (Lebanon)
- Multi-ethnic oriented mixed character tourism (Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, UAE)
- Multi-ethnic oriented cultural and pilgrim tourism (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Palestine)

In recent years, the geo-political climate has re-organized worldwide tourism flows and had the effect of reorienting Western Tourists and Arab Tourists. On one hand, North American and European tourists deserted Arab countries. This impacted greatly on countries depending on Western Tourists such as Morocco and Tunisia (Kalesar, 2010; Stephenson & Ali, 2010). On the other hand, some Arab destinations have gained a certain popularity with Muslim tourists. This is the case with Dubai, which rapidly became one of Muslims tourists’ (especially Middle Eastern tourists) favourite destination for short holidays as it offers undisputed traits and advantages: Security, near-home locations and common culture combined with world-class and extravagant hotels, entertainments, restaurants, mega-scale tourist projects, shopping Malls and tourist events (Al Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Henderson, 2003). Lebanon has also benefited from this Pro-Arab destination selection and is appropvingly chosen as a summer vacation. Finally, Turkey and Malaysia were able to reach the top of the Islamic Tourism Destination list for two consecutive years thanks to their Islamic focused marketing strategies (Al Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Henderson, 2003). Eventually, intra-regional tourism has increased and is currently reaching 40% of the international arrivals with new types of tourism being introduced: medical tourism (Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt), spa tourism (Tunisia), green tourism, sport tourism (Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE) and conference tourism (UAE, Qatar) (Al Hamarneh, 2005). Arab and Muslim destinations have the advantages to perfectly cater for the Muslims market’s needs. Indeed, these destinations offer halal products, a culture which acknowledges Islamic principles and very attractive tourism settings. As illustrated in Figure 1 and 2, these destinations are predominantly located in Africa, Asia and the Middle East offering good climate, varied landscape, good facilities and a rich heritage. Such destinations also cater for non-Muslims interested in Arab culture and Muslim heritage, broadening the concept of Islamic Tourism to curious non-Muslim tourists interested in Muslim and Arab Heritage, which will be discussed below.

Many companies have developed businesses around Halal friendly brands and services and the global halal market represents around US$2 Trillion (Arabian Gazette, 2013). Crescentrating Pte Ltd. is a Singaporean companies focusing on the development of halal friendly travel and services. It is labelled as The World's Leading Authority on Halal & Muslim Friendly Travel and is perceived by Muslims as a source of valuable information. They are also appreciated as a quality-gauging indicator. Indeed, this company ranks holiday destinations in terms of their halal friendliness, taking into consideration variables such as halal food quality, halal certified restaurants, prayer facilities, halal friendly accommodation, family
perceived as Muslim friendly. Thailand and South Africa also have strong halal certification bodies (Arabian Business, 2012) and have been selected accordingly to feature on the non-OIC chart.

Arab countries have been quite active in tourism development as Arab destinations such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia have a long tradition of Cultural or Religious Tourism. Muslim destinations have also engaged in tourism, principally focusing on Western arrivals and are currently reorienting towards Muslim-friendly products such as Malaysia and Turkey. Thus, tourism has always been dynamic within both spheres. Indeed, regional, consensual agreements and alliances existed between Arab and Muslim countries in relation to tourism over the years, however the 21st century marks the era of formal and organized Islamic Tourism cooperation recognising the tourism potential of Muslim countries, their problems, obstacles and needs in terms of development, promotions, practice, implementation and code of conduct. Indeed, Al Hamarneh & Steiner (2004) offer a comprehensive enumeration of the main cooperation initiatives starting with the 1st international meeting on tourism of Islamic countries (ICMT) initiated by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Esfahan (Iran) in 2000, which concluded with the Esfahan Declaration, determining the importance of further intensive cooperation in tourism among Islamic countries but lacking in term of practical measures adopted. The 2nd ICMT took place in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) in 2001.

### Table 1: Top OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) and non-OIC Halal destinations

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Source: CRaHFT Ranking 2013 & 2014 Top Halal Friendly destinations (Crescentrating.com)
in a somehow heavy and uncertain atmosphere as it immediately followed the September 11th terrorist attacks. Nonetheless, the second meeting was more active and focused; the innovative notion of intra-Muslim tourism was suggested for the first time and enabled the creation of the Kuala Lumpur Working Program, which took into consideration every possible step to prevent an eventual tourism collapse in Arab and Muslim countries. The 3rd ICMT took place in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) in 2002 and enabled the concept of Intra-Muslim Tourism to be reinforced and secured into a cooperation treaty between the WTO and ICMT. In addition, practical measures and notions were discussed and adopted such as the usage of Arabic as an official working language in the WTO as well as concepts such as financial support by the Islamic Bank for tourism development, establishing a joint Intra-Muslim centre for tourism marketing and promotion, visa restrictions and promotion of a common code of behaviour for Muslim tourists (Al Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004). Since 2000, several more bilateral and multilateral agreements, treaties and conferences have taken place addressing current trends facing Arab and Muslim destinations, making those seminars and meetings more competitive, informative, aggressive and practical with concrete outcomes. Indeed, for 2015 alone the following events have taken place in relation to Islamic Tourism: the World Halal Summit (Kuala Lumpur, March 2015), the Expo Halal (Madrid, October 2015), the 6th Global Islamic Marketing Conference (Istanbul, May 2015), the World Islamic Travel Summit (Abu Dhabi, October 2015) and the 7th Halal Expo (Dubai, September 2015).

Islamic Tourism is an emerging trend and is finally taken seriously by professionals who are marketing and promoting its elements. Intra-Arab and Intra-Muslim travel, which have been reinforced by the geopolitical climate and the genuine tourist requirements of the Muslim market, are increasing significantly. Consequently, tourism destinations are now focusing on the Muslim travellers’ needs, which are essentially based on their beliefs and rituals as previously mentioned.

**Islamic Tourism as a rigorous way of life**

This section uses the term rigorous to highlight the meticulous and precise manner by which Muslims abide to Islamic principles and rituals as a life doctrine rather than a constraint. Religion and Tourism have always been linked. Indeed, religion has been an important reason to travel and until now religious tourism comprises a significant proportion of domestic and international tourism (Henderson, 2003; Sharpley, 1994; Wall & Mathieson, 2006), in fact it has recently experienced a certain resurgence worldwide among tourists (Digance, 2003, Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Many authors consider religious tourism as the first form of tourism (Henderson, 2003; Shackley, 2001) as well as claiming that it is as old as religion itself. Indeed, Nolan and Nolan (1992), Rinschede (1992), Sharpley (1994), Selwyn (1996), Vukonic (1996) and finally Shackley (2001) suggest that religious sites are among the most ancient tourism destinations. Consequently, religion has shaped the world, as we know it today and is an important social and cultural phenomenon, which determines people and entire communities’ attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours. Interestingly, Islam offers a particular perspective as the boundaries of the spiritual and the secular are transcended (Jaffari & Scott, 2014:2). The Quran specifies rigorous guidelines on various aspects of human and daily activities (Hodge, 2002; Jafari & Scott, 2014). Travelling is one such activity, which is linked to the modern concept of Tourism, thus, Islam is influential in the needs and choices of travelling Muslims (Jafari & Scott, 2014).

The Book “Tourism in the Muslim World” (2010) edited by Scott & Jafari is key to understand current tourism trends in Muslim countries as well as providing a good starting point to explore Muslim-friendly destinations and general aspects of Muslim daily lives and practices. Indeed, the first part of the book offers an overview of Islam and clearly explains the inseparable relationship between the sacred and the secular that governs every Muslim. Fundamental to all of this is Sharia law which is therefore imperative to consider in Muslim-friendly destinations and attractions.

Accordingly, tourism products have been developed to respond to halal and sharia principles, offering sharia compliance hotels and Islamic resorts featuring alcohol-free beverages, gender segregated premises, strict dress code, prayer rooms availability on site, Islamic entertainment programs etc … This trend is labelled “Halal Tourism”, which is a new concept for some destinations but is perfectly well established for others, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, where such Islamic principles were already implemented (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004). However, the two most common
As well as “women only” hostels such as the Orsa Maggiore in Rome, The Hostelle in Amsterdam or the Sakura guest house in Osaka. Scholars believe that this Islamic trend, targeting Muslim consumers, can also answer the needs of non-Muslim consumers, especially the health conscious market as Islam is a religion that is close to nature, respects animals and praises the acts of praying, meditating and contemplating. Services such as headscarf styling, halal cosmetics free from pork derivatives (collagen, glycerin, keratin, tallow), and prayer facilities (Stephenson & Ali, 2010; Woo, 2011; Zawya, 2011) all have broader appeal than just for Muslim travellers. Finally, Marketers are now developing a Halal airline concept including prayer rooms with ablution facilities, gender segregated seating, in-flight religious entertainment, alcohol free beverages and halal meals (Husain, 2007), however, even though Islamic friendly airlines are already operating with prayer recording, halal meals and

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<td></td>
<td>Separate leisure facilities (including swimming pools and spas)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Female and male prayer rooms equipped with the Qur’an (also available at the front desk)</td>
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<td>Built-in wudhu facilities (washing area enabling the ablution process before praying) located outside prayer rooms</td>
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<td><strong>Hotel Operation</strong></td>
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<td>Transactions and investments in accordance with Islamic banking, accounting and finance (funding used to operate hotel needs to be based on Islamic financial principles)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Management and ownership preferably by Muslim individuals</td>
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Source: Table adapted from information from Henderson, 2010 and Stephenson, 2010; 2014.
alcohol free beverages such as Air Arabia (UAE), Saudi Arabian Airlines and Kuwait Airways, they do not fully embrace the sharia law principles as such. Islamic cruises and Islamic resorts are also developing under similar prerequisites (Stephenson, 2014). Indeed, Salaam Cruise who undertook their first cruise in 2012 use the branding: halal vacation experience, and offer halal food, tourists activities in the company of fellow Muslims, visit to local masjids, Islamic lectures by world leading scholars and speakers as well as providing a great environment to meet future Muslim spouses. Finally, Islamic Tour Operators are also developing such as Halal Booking who advertise as the World leader in Halal holidays, offering beaches and pools for women and families, halal food and non-alcoholic drinks, family friendly entertainments involving heritage discovery tours of Islamic countries and features in its portfolio: beach resorts, city breaks, city tours, health resorts, spas and luxurious and private villas. Their most popular destination is Turkey but they also feature Bahrain, UAE, Egypt and Maldives.

Islamic Tourism seems to be more than a tourism niche, it can be perceived as a ‘philosophy’ or a way of life rigorously following Islamic teachings. Muslims, Halal friendly destinations and Halal Tourism, which are the three first components of Islamic Tourism are inter-connected and can be seen as inseparable. These three elements form one entity incorporating: “Muslims travelling to Muslim friendly destinations offering Halal Tourism options”, which is the first part of our definition of Islamic Tourism.

**Islamic Tourism as a Cultural Force**

The last component of the definition is probably the most important one as it involves variables such as Muslims, non-Muslims, tourists, art, heritage, culture, history, pride to name just a few. Indeed, It concentrates on orienting tourist destinations towards Islamic historical, religious and cultural sites in an effort to merge religious and leisure tourism in joint programs. The cultural Arabization and / or Islamization of tourism are to be understood as a reaction against western loaded cultural globalization and an attempt to protect Islamic culture and heritage through selected Islamic attractions and tourist sites involving Muslim history and Arab contemporary society and culture.

The second aspect of the cultural dimension of Islamic Tourism is the new interpretation of religious tourism and pilgrimage, which has always been at its prime in the region, with important and long standing pilgrimage sites and holy cities in Saudi Arabia (Makka and Medina), Israel (Jerusalem) and Iraq (Karbala and Najaf) (Al Hamarneh, 2005; Ibrahim, 1997; Newby, 2002). This updated interpretation of pilgrimage involves combining leisure activities with traditional pilgrim activities, enabling the spiritual dimension of pilgrimages to meet a certain level of distraction after or before the actual religious rituals. Saudi Arabian officials are considering developing tourist products along these lines in their holy sites while in other Muslim countries, similar projects are being developed around Islamic sites such as Mu’ta in Jordan, Qum in Iran and old mosques in Bosnia.

In this sense, Cultural tourism engages Muslims in a desire to understand their own heritage and history in relation to Islam and their cultural roots, as well as embracing non-Muslims, curious to discover Arab and Muslim heritage through iconic heritage tourist sites; enabling them to comprehend these civilizations, their citizens, their habits and rituals through Islam. However, our definition of Islamic Tourism does not include curious non-Muslim tourists as we perceive them to be Religious Heritage tourists rather than Islamic Tourists. Indeed, Islamic Tourism has a strong emphasis on Muslim communities, their needs and Islamic principles that do not refer to non-Muslim tourists.

As previously mentioned, Islam and Muslims are joined whereby Islam’s transcendence transforms this religion into a philosophy to live by. Consequently, to understand the Arab world and its tourist attractions, it is important to have notions of Islam and to know its followers. Islam and its followers congregate in one place: The Mosque. Accordingly, one of the most representative edifices of both, Arab and Muslim heritage is the mosque as it is part of the landscape of all Muslim countries and often symbolizes the historical spread of Islam, its practice and the grandeur of past civilizations. Mosques are very different from one country to another in terms of style and design, as they have embraced the culture of each country adopting Islam as a religion. It is extremely difficult to find a tour or a tourist itinerary in one of the OIC or non-OIC list not mentioning a mosque as a key tourist site as this building is central to the Muslim world, the Arab world and the Muslim communities. Therefore, we have established that Islamic Tourism is
What is a Mosque?

Mosques are linked to Islam and its rituals, consequently it is important to fully understand the principles of Islam in order to realize the significance and purpose of mosques for Muslims and Muslim communities.

Praying is an important part of every religious person; In Islam, prayers are one of the 5 pillars, which means that they are compulsory and very important in a Muslims’ life. Prayers are referred to as “Salat” and performed five times daily at particular times:
- at dawn, between the first light and sunrise (al-fajr),
- midday or after the sun has passed the middle of the sky (al-zuhr),
- afternoon between mid-afternoon and sunset (al-'asr),
- sunset between sunset and the last light of the day (al-maghrib) and
- evening between darkness and midnight (al-'isha).

Usually salat is undertaken in a mosque or in a prayer room under certain conditions and follows a specific ritual. Prayers are directed towards the Qibla of the Ka’ba in Mecca, on a prayer mat “Sajjada” and are preceded by ablutions called “wudu”, which consist of washing body parts such as the face, hands and feet. Prayers can be performed individually, usually at home or with others, in a mosque, which carries special merit and is recommended.

Men are expected to pray in a mosque, in congregation, and while women are welcome to pray in the mosque it is more praiseworthy for them to pray in their homes. Nonetheless, Muslims are permitted to pray anywhere, excluding filthy or impure places such as toilets or in graveyards. Friday prayer has to be undertaken at midday in a mosque and is referred to as Salaat Al-Jumu’ah. Friday is the holy day of the week and is the most important service as it gives a certain rhythm to the whole week; representing a day of devotion and worship. This Friday prayer is very particular and obeys different rules as it cannot be offered individually and is recommended to be performed in a congregation led by a prayer leader; hence, mosques and their availability are crucial to Muslims (Abdullah et al., 2013; Al Hamarneh &
According to the Quran, properly performed prayers have great impact on one’s life:

Verily, man was created impatient, irritable when evil touches him and ungenerous when good touches him. Except for those devoted to prayer those who remain constant in their prayers . . . (Quran 70:19-23).

God has obligated five prayers. Whoever excellently performs their ablutions, prays them in their proper times, completes their bows, prostrations and khushu, has a promise from God that He will forgive him. And whoever does not do that has no promise from God. He may either forgive him or punish him.

Consequently, the act of praying brings God’s forgiveness and life’s pleasure. Indeed, salat is considered to be a time of remorse and repentance as well as being a deterrent of wrong doing, as prostrating oneself and taking time to pray five times daily should keep one from doing sinful acts during the day, by lack of time to sin or because one is at peace thanks to these prayers. Consequently, prayers are seen as a type of purification for a human being:

If a person had a stream outside his door and he bathed in it five times a day, do you think he would have any filth left on him?” The people said, “No filth would remain on him whatsoever.” The Prophet then said, “That is like the five daily prayers: God wipes away the sins by them. (Recorded by Saheeh Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

This hadith demonstrates that prayers are considered to wipe away evil deeds that one might have committed. This is why the prophet explained:

[to pray] the five daily prayers and the Friday Prayer until the Friday prayer are expiation for what is between them. (Recorded by Saheeh Muslim).

When travelling or as it is mentioned in the Quran ‘being away from home for more than 3 consecutive days’, prayers are still mandatory but can be condensed from 5 daily prayers to 2 shorten prayers (rak’ahs). Consequently, even while on holidays, it is the duty of a Muslim to reach to a mosque for their prayers. This is clearly mentioned in the Quran

O you who have believed, when [the adhan] is called for the prayer on the day of Jumu‘ah [Friday], then proceed to the remembrance of Allah and leave trade. That is better for you, if you only knew (Surat Al Jumu‘ah, 62:9).

However, when travelling in a country or city without a mosque, praying at home is possible with an emphasis on reaching a Muslim community to pray in congregation at home or in a prayer room, still relating to the concept of Ummah and Muslim Fraternity or brotherhood that is of great importance in Islam.

Apart from being a place of worship, mosques are also social and gathering locations within a neighbourhood as well as being utilized as education centres (Abdullah et al., 2013; Taib & Rasdi, 2012). Building a mosque is an important event within a community and needs to follow certain criteria in terms of site planning and design. The mosque should ideally be located within a residential area easily accessible by public transportation with its entrance visible from the street, adjacent to parking facilities and located on elevated land easily expandable in the future if required (Kahera et al., 2009). Unfortunately many modern mosques have lost their essence and original purpose, which was to cater for a community because of political and social changes within modern Muslim society. Indeed, nowadays, mosques are built as iconic buildings and landmarks as a nation’s statement of its grandeur, architectural supremacy and power, with emphasis on aesthetics rather than functionality (Frishman & Khan, 2002; Spahic, 2002; Taib & Rasdi, 2012). Mosques following their original purpose and therefore their function in the Quran are labelled as ‘Sustainable mosques’ as they combine sustainable communal mosque design, sustainable multi-functional communal usage in order to enhance the quality of life of the community by reflecting the true teachings of Islam as stipulated in the Quran and hadith, regardless of the fact that they are located in a Muslim or non-Muslim country (Baharudin & Ismail, 2014). The building itself and its architecture is important as a mosque is the Islamic building par excellence, and as such the key to Islamic architecture (Hillenbrand, 1994). A mosque is characterized by the presence of a dome, a minaret, a mihrab and a minbar (See Figure 3), which cannot be omitted, as it would distort the main function of the building and therefore tarnish it sacredness (Frishman & Khan, 2002; Taib & Rasdi, 2012).
The mosque can be compared to a community centre. It used to be a place to teach religious and secular subjects, to settle community disputes, to use the library, to rest in a clean and safe environment and to have food, water and shelter for the poorest. It was also a place where news and regional or international information were announced as well as being a place for celebrations. In time, as Muslim nations and their communities became bigger and mosques started to be built in important numbers in each cities, their role started to change. Indeed, in Muslim countries those roles are only left to the largest mosques. In the West interestingly, while Muslim communities may have an abundance of ‘Muslim friendly’ or ‘Halal friendly’ facilities such as schools, shopping areas or restaurants, Mosques are the place that maintain their sense of identity forming an Islamic Centre containing religious, community and teaching facilities. They are places that bring Muslims together, to develop their sense of identity and belonging as well as enabling them to create a bond with God and to keep their spirituality alive.

Consequently, Mosques are central to the Arab world, the Muslim world and Muslims in general as a place in itself but also as a symbol of a faith that brings people together and serves a community. A great example of a 21st century mosque blending tradition with modernity is the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Oman, which opened in 2001. The Grand Mosque is opened to Muslims and non-Muslims, who can use the well appointed library with modern equipment to facilitate research and knowledge distribution, learn Arabic and Islam. It allows Muslims to pray and offers seminars and lectures on religious and some secular topics as well as allowing tourists (Muslims or not) to visit the Mosque premises outside of prayer times. Tourists are welcome to enter the visitor centre to talk with the Mosque volunteers on topics related to Islam, Oman, their way of living or any other topics that such a visit might raise.

A wide variety of mosque designs and styles exist in the world, based on their location since Mosques serve as the single most important visible representation of Muslim identity and values (Frishman & Khan, 2002). Mosques are a building and a functional space: The building is a prayer house catering for Muslim followers but essentially it carries out the functions of community centre for the Ummah. It is a grand building, a symbol of Islam and its teachings and consequently attracts people of diverse interest.

Mosques are sacred building in Islam and entering or simply ‘being’ in a mosque outside of prayer times counts as a ‘good deed’ (Frishman & Khan, 2002). Spanning many centuries of history and an undeniable symbol of beauty, architectural splendour and devotion, mosques are found in every neighbourhood in Muslim countries and in the main cities of non-Muslim countries. Many are only opened to Muslims but some can be visited by non-Muslims outside of prayer times. They are part of those countries’ heritage and landscape and can for the western eye be visual wonders full of mystery and oriental myth. The scale and grandeur of some mosques has transformed those sacred community centres into tourist landmarks and ‘must see’ attractions, part of exploring a tourist destination, reflecting the country’s cultural, historical and architectural aspects. Consequently, tourists often visit a mosque as part of their holiday without religious motivation, even if the primary purpose of the mosque is a spiritual one. Interestingly, even tourists who do not physically enter a mosque to visit it are touched by their presence as mosques in Muslim countries form part of the scenery and the sense of place (Henderson, 2003). One of its most visible and audible element is the Minaret, the tower where the call of the prayer “Adhan” is performed, which can be compared to church bells in countries of Christian tradition, to summon the faithful to prayer (Frishman & Khan, 2002:11). Mosques are composed of various elements which are important for religious rituals and are
recognizable by their architectural features as per Figure 3:

- **The prayer hall:** A demarcated space partly roofed and partly opened to the sky to accommodate the congregation at prayer times.
- **The Qibla wall:** A prayer hall must have a wall facing Mecca.
- **The Mihrab:** A niche, which is the central and most decorated feature of the mosque, usually located in the centre of the Qibla wall.
- **The Minbar:** A pulpit positioned at the right of the Mihrab allowing the Iman leading the prayer to deliver his oration.
- **The Qubba:** A dome which is the symbolic representation of the vault to heaven.
- **The Kursi:** The lectern on which the Quran is placed for reading and recitation purpose.
- **The Dikka:** A platform from where the prayer leader shows ritual postures and speaks the responses to be transmitted to the congregation.
- **The ablution area**

- **The Minaret:** A tall tower from which the call for prayer “adhan” is performed.
- **The pratan and the Plinth:** Gateways to the mosque

Additionally, Mosques are decorated with calligraphy, geometric patterns and the use of Quranic quotations, which serve to indicate that the building is sacred and to convey a spiritual message to passers-by and people coming to pray. Geometric patterns in decoration serve to enrich and beautify the interior. Such patterns create an atmosphere favouring meditation and prayer as well as having a metaphysical significance (Frishman & Khan, 2002).

Henderson (2003) suggests that a mosque itself may be considered a tourist attraction if they are unique and outstanding. Indeed, throughout the Muslim world many mosques have become tourist attractions, known for their majesty. Some of those tourist mosques are no longer houses of prayers but some manage to establish a dual usage and purpose. The Grand Mosque of Paris, which opened in 1926 is the oldest mosque in France and is a focal points for the French Muslim community as well as a famous Parisian landmark visited by

<table>
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<th>Table 3: Key Mosques in Top Halal-Friendly Destinations</th>
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<td><strong>Top Halal Travel destinations</strong></td>
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tourists. It comprises a library, a conference hall, a madrassa (school), a prayer hall, a 3500 square meter garden and annexes include an oriental restaurant, a teahouse, a women only hammam and a shop. Adults and children are able to learn Arabic, Quran and Islam principles in its madrassa. In addition, it hosts many events such as book fairs of Muslim literature in Arabic and French, religious conferences and lectures, Muslim community celebrations as well as having a halal service centre informing and training on what is permitted in halal product consumption. Finally, tourists are welcomed to visit the Mosque and its gardens, with benefits from gorgeous mudejar architecture and calligraphy decorations, following the Iberian style influenced by the Moors.

All of the OIC top halal destinations countries have engaged in different tourism development strategies featuring different types of tourism and tourist policies. They all have one feature in common: mosques. As Muslim countries, mosques are part of their landscapes and of their history. It would be impossible to visit Djerba in Tunisia, which is principally a beach resort island without passing by one of its 365 mosques scattered across its 514 square kilometres. They are part of each country and its essence. From a tourist point of view, many of them are key landmarks and central tourist points of interest. Table 3 lists the main mosques, which are tourist attractions in the top OIC halal friendly destinations, to illustrate the importance of this building as a tourist attraction. Indeed, many of the listed mosques are ‘must see’ attractions and well known landmarks as well as being symbols for Muslim communities of those countries.

It is interesting to notice that many World Heritage Sites of Cultural importance listed by UNESCO are mosques, reinforcing their importance on historical, architectural, religious and tourist bases. Historic Cairo features the Al Azar Mosque and Morocco, the Kutubiya, which are beautiful buildings full of history. The Suleiman Mosque and Selimiye Mosque in Istanbul are well known landmarks, similarly the great city of Kairouan in Tunisia, is called the city of 50 mosques and is referred to as the spiritual house of all Tunisians and the 4th most holy city after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Certainly, mosques are central features in Islam and the Arab world.

Long-standing tourist destinations such as Egypt or Tunisia have always recognized the importance of their mosques from a tourist point of view and have promoted them to tourists by including them in their cultural itineraries and excursions portfolio. Recently developed tourist destinations have also understood the importance of those iconic buildings in their scenery and tourist attraction development.

Indeed, each Gulf country has built a colossal mosque, symbol of their grandeur and ability to master the construction of a huge and magnificent building, often competing with their Khaleeji neighbours. Oman built the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in 2001, which was at the time the biggest mosque in the Middle East with a capacity of 20000 worshippers, featuring a world record for the world's second largest hand-woven carpet and chandelier. This was dethroned 6 years later, by Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, which can currently host 40000 worshippers.

Most of those mosques have a dual usage as they are used by worshippers for prayers and other activities, while they also cater for tourists at specific times, outside of prayer times. Accordingly, The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Oman can be visited free of charge from 8am to 11am from Saturday to Thursday and features an ‘information centre’ managed by volunteers, where tourists can ask questions about the mosque but also learn about Islam, Oman and its inhabitants. Coffee, fresh mineral water and Omani dates are served and free books and CDs in various languages are distributed on topics such as women & Islam, understanding the Quran, the prophets and similarities and differences of Islam with Judaism or Christianity in a very informal and welcoming atmosphere (El Amrousi & Biln, 2010).

Qatar have designed more formal Mosque Tours featuring for instance the Blue Mosque in Doha focusing on its aesthetics, its interior and its history. In addition, a tour of the village of Katara and its mosque followed by a traditional Arabic dinner. Here, ‘Fanar’, The Qatar Islamic Cultural Centre offers Arabic lessons, an understanding of Qatari culture and lifestyle as well as the possibility to witness Friday prayer at Fanar’s mosque for non-Arabic speakers in English. This organisation is also open to non-Muslim who are eager to learn about Islam. While the technique in these mosques is different, the aim is very similar: To enable Muslims to pray in a beautiful mosque featuring all modern facilities and enabling Muslims who do not speak English to enjoy Friday prayer in their own language, while also allowing tourists (Muslims or not) to visit the Mosque, admiring
its interior and exterior and giving them a chance to get a glimpse of the culture, the Arabian way of life and to understand Islam.

Ultimately, this paper establishes that Mosques often take an emblematic form such as the as the large state sponsored national mosques in Muslim countries, or as symbols offering emotional support to a Muslim minority in non-Muslim countries (Frishman & Khan, 2002:14). Consequently, 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 access their duality, as tourists or worshippers while travelling.

**Conclusion**

This paper has identified a rich and complex body of knowledge involving a number of themes and areas for further research. It has clarifies the concept of Islamic Tourism as

*Muslims travelling to Muslim friendly destinations offering halal tourism options combining religious and cultural muslim oriented attractions*

by interconnecting its components: muslims, destinations, religion and culture. Mosques are recognised to be the link between all components as a building but also as a functional space serving a community. Mosques are an important feature of Islamic tourism as they bring together all of the components defining it. Indeed, mosques serve Muslim communities (Muslim market), are central to Muslim and Arab destinations, are key to rigorous Islamic practice and are significant in cultural tourism and pride building. Consequently, the term ‘Mosque Tourism’ finds its legitimacy in Islamic Tourism and should be adopted to define religious and non-religious visits to mosques in the context of Islamic Tourism, incorporating Muslims visiting mosques as tourist attractions while travelling, Muslims attending prayers while travelling and non-Muslims visiting mosques as tourists or knowledge seekers. This focal point of Islamic Tourism is also the key to sustainable halal and cultural tourism in Arab and Muslim countries, as a sustainable concept borrowing from its original Quranic function. In the Quran, Mosques were sustainable buildings designed to serve a community and its residents in general, those being Muslims or not. Indeed, mosques were places of knowledge and shelter for Muslims and non-Muslims. Promoting Mosques while respecting their Quranic function and thus enabling non-Muslims to visit those symbolic buildings and to understand Islam, its rituals and its followers might help to dissolve the misconception of Islam and reduce Islamophobia. Consequently, this paper is a valuable step in introducing ‘Mosque Tourism’ and presenting it as a strategic tool for sustainable Islamic Tourism.

Future research should be conducted on this theme and should attempt to validate this term with Muslims and non-Muslim tourists visiting mosques for religious and cultural purposes, focusing on Islamic countries with different cultures, history and level of tourism development.
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