

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious tourism amongst Muslims in Iraq



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Tourism, as an industry, has become one of the most dynamic sectors of the world economy these days and has specific features that are different from other industries. In the tourism industry, production and consumption points occur spatially at the same time. In addition, the tourism industry contributes to the economic growth of developed regions and can simultaneously distribute the wealth created geographically. It is notable that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused many challenges in the tourism industry regarding the presence of tourists in tourism centres and the closing of all tourism service chains, including food, entertainment, transportation and travel services worldwide. Tourism-related businesses, which are considered as invisible export and one of the engines of development and occupation, have been rendered obsolete. In other words, the businesses, as well as multiple units and activities in the related chain, have been damaged and employees of this industry have lost their jobs. This has led to the recession and regressive course of the developing and large industry of tourism in the world. It is worth noting that the tourism industry includes various sections, the most important of which is religious tourism. All religions in the world have different religious places, works, traditions and customs, which have become amongst the most important tourist attractions. Meanwhile, Muslims and the religion of Islam play a significant role in this branch of tourism. The Hajj, pilgrimage to holy places and the existence of mourning ceremonies or religious celebrations of Muslims are amongst the largest religious tourism events in the world. Given the importance of this issue, the present study aimed to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious tourism in Iraq in 2021. This field study was conducted on 4500 Muslim managers and staff of restaurants, hotels, grocery stores, clothing stores and souvenir shops around the holy shrines of imams and religious places in Karbala, Najaf, Kufa, Samarra and Kazemi. According to the results, the tourism of Iraq, which is mainly limited to Muslim religious sites in several major Iraqi cities, has also seen a decline in the number of religious tourists. The negative effects of COVID-19 on religious tourism have also been proved statistically by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), as $\mu \geq 3$ has been counted in all indices.

Contribution: Our findings offered new insights into the impact of COVID-19 on tourism, based on statistical analysis. In this study, the authors showed how COVID-19 affects various aspects of religious tourism, which has not been addressed in previous researches.

Keywords: religion; religious tourism; Muslims; COVID-19 pandemic; Iraq.

Introduction

Throughout history, people's movement on Earth and migration from one land to another has always played a fundamental role in the formation and expansion of civilisations. A number of experts believe that migration has been essential to the development of human civilisation. In other words, journey and touring, or in modern terms tourism and the tourism industry, are not a new topic and have existed since ancient times. In fact, human beings have been immigrants or tourists from the day they came into being (Alipour, Olya & Forouzan 2017). In today's world, travel is a necessity of social life and the most important factor for communication in various cultural, social and political areas. As a dynamic industry with unique features, the tourism industry has been allocated an important part of the economic and production activities of developed and developing countries (Brace, Bailey & Harvey 2006). Given that tourism plays an

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effective role in several vital aspects of people's lives as one of their physical, mental and natural needs, it has been emphasised in all divine schools, especially the religion of Islam. In fact, all religions have different places, works, traditions and religious ceremonies all over the world which have become important aspects of tourism. Meanwhile, Islam and Muslims have played a fundamental role in this branch of tourism because Hajj rituals, pilgrimage to holy places and the existence of mourning ceremonies or religious celebrations of Muslims have been amongst the biggest religious tourism events in the world (Almuhrzy & Alsawafi 2017). Islam takes a holistic approach to all aspects of human beings, including the physical and psychological aspects, and has determined a certain agenda for all human needs. There are different types of tourism, including nature tourism, heritage tourism, health tourism, sports tourism and e-tourism (Heydari Chianeh, Del Chiappa & Ghasemi 2018).

Religious tourism is a type of tourism that overcomes weather barriers, meaning that the number of tourists and visits to religious centres and cities does not change with seasonal and climate changes. The destination is not the only important matter in this type of tourism. In fact, the experience starts from leaving the origin and includes the entire path and events encountered along the way (Collins-Kreiner 2010). Religious tourism plays a basic role in the social life of Islamic countries. In addition to the economic and financial aspects of religious tourism, it increases communication with Islamic communities and results in interaction between nations and cultures that have things in common (Farahani & Henderson 2010). Religious tourism was one of the biggest types of tourism in the world before COVID-19, especially in Iraq. However, some of the biggest religious ceremonies of the Islamic world, such as Hajj rituals and the Arbaeen mourning ceremony, have been limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some governments have completely banned the participation of pilgrims in holy ceremonies and have closed some of the holy shrines. On the other hand, Islamic narratives have emphasised travel and have mentioned the advantages of travelling, such as health and vitality of body and soul; acquiring knowledge; familiarity with elders, social customs and ethics of other nations; learning; the disappearance of sorrows and sufferings; providing livelihood and getting a job; thinking about divine blessings; and healthy recreation and leisure (Tonekaboni 1998).

Therefore, the identification of components affecting religious tourism is of paramount importance. Given the multiple challenges caused by the sudden spread of COVID-19 in the world, the present study aimed to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on religious tourism amongst Muslims in Iraq in 2021.

Literature review

In December 2019, a viral illness was reported in Wuhan, China. The cause of this disease was a new and genetically modified virus from the family of coronaviruses called SARS CoV-2, which was named COVID-19 disease (Li et al. 2020).

Unfortunately, because of its very high transmission rate, the virus spread rapidly throughout the world, infecting almost every country in almost less than four months. COVID-19 disease, which is caused by an RNA virus (Chen et al. 2020), affects the respiratory tract of people and spreads catastrophically. Unfortunately, this virus has infected Iraq like other countries in the world, and the fight against this virus is being carried out nationwide and comprehensively throughout the country. However, because of the novelty of this virus and the amount of information available about the pathogenicity of the virus as well as methods of control and treatment of this disease, currently the most important way to deal with it is to prevent the spread of the virus. Owing to the prevalence of COVID-19, all important economic, political, social and even military aspects of the world have been affected by this disease. Amongst these, the tourism industry was one of the sectors that suffered the most from the virus. The position of the tourism industry at the global level and its role in the economic and social development of countries, especially developing countries, has led to more attention to its various dimensions in recent years, but with the beginning of COVID-19, the tourism industry fluctuated and created difficult days for tourists. In recent years, tourism services amongst the various industries have suffered the most from the outbreak of COVID-19 as global statistics show that international travel in Asia has dropped by about 82% (Dehghanbanadaki et al. 2020). The growth of the tourism industry has increased in the last 10 years, and out of every five new jobs created, one is related to the tourism industry. According to statistics, 10.5% of world gross domestic product (GDP) was allocated to travel and tourism. Whilst the global economy grew by 2.5% before COVID-19, the tourism industry grew by 3.5%. In fact, the growth rate of tourism has been 1% faster than other economic sectors (Borimnejad & Dehyouri 2022). Because of the severe restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of land, sea, rail and air borders for several months, we have witnessed a significant reduction in passenger traffic to Iraq. Iraq is one of the most important destinations for religious tourism amongst Muslims, especially Shiites around the world, because of its special religious characteristics and the presence of the shrine of the Infallible Imams. Iraq annually hosts millions of domestic and foreign tourists who travel to this country for pilgrimage. Much of the economy and income of Iraq's religious cities depends on services and tourism, and it was at the height of the tourism boom that COVID-19 hit Iraqi tourism and limited much of the country's tourism facilities.

Religious tourism is one of the most ancient and most prosperous types of tourism in the past and present and dates back to religious culture itself. In general, religious tourism is defined as visiting temples, holy places and shrines. Religious tourists are cultural tourists who travel to visit religious places, works and memorials, do religious practices and learn and improve their knowledge of religious places of the world (Durán-Sánchez et al. 2018). Religious tourism includes all religions, and religious tourists may visit holy places several times; visiting a place once would not deter them from frequent visits (Almuhrzy & Alsawafi 2017).

In general, religious tourists can be divided into two groups, the first being pilgrims or those whose motive for travelling is only to do religious affairs and whose time and duration of stay are not subject to leisure. The second category involves religious tourists who visit other religious and nonreligious places in addition to participating in religious rituals. In other words, they make a multipurpose trip with pilgrimage as a priority. Another classification presents two types of tourists, including those who visit holy places related to their own religion and those who visit the holy places of other religions as well (Nyaupane, Timothy & Poudel 2015).

Religious tourism is generally defined as a type of tourism with only religious motives or a combination of religious motives with other motives, which includes visiting holy places such as temples, churches, mosques, tombs and shrines (Terzidou, Scarles & Saunders 2018). Based on this definition, religious tourists are those who visit the holy places of their own religion, such as Muslims who visit Mecca and the holy shrines of Iraq, and some tourists visit holy places of other religions (Husein 2018), such as those who are not Christian but visit different churches. The origin of tourism itself goes back to pilgrimages, where religious people would visit their holy places. In other words, tourism is the new and advanced form of religious trips. Today, religious tourism has become a part of global tourism, owing to its special structural and functional characteristics. Estimates show that 26% of all tourism flows are dedicated to religious tourism. According to the World Tourism Organization, 300–330 million pilgrims visit the religious places of the world every year, and this number has grown significantly every year. In addition, 39.1 million international trips to the Middle East were made in 2005, which is expected to reach 159 million by 2030. In fact, this region has become the centre of religious tourism in the world because of its centrality to the three religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism (Aghajani & Farahani Fard 2015).

Tourism from the perspective of the Holy Qur'an

Many Ayats of the Holy Qur'an emphasise travel and invite people to travel on earth. In fact, the Holy Qur'an orders tourism by directly using the word 'travel' (i.e. Surah Al-Ankabut, Ayat 20; Surah Ar-Rum, Ayat 42; Surah An-Nahl, Ayat 36; Surah An-Naml, Ayat 69; Surah Al-An'am, Ayat 11; Surah Al-Imran, Ayat 137) or indirectly pointing it out (Surah Yusuf, Ayat 109; Surah Ar-Rum, Ayat 9; Surah Fatir, Ayat 44; Surah Ghafir, Ayat 21; Surah Muhammad, Ayat 10). The verses of the Qur'an about travel are not limited to the mentioned verses. According to the Qur'an, the purposes and benefits of tourism include seeing the works of the past and learning lessons; experiencing gratitude; learning about theology, the creation process, reasoning in matters and the state of the past; understanding the traditions of the past, which is a statement for people and is the cause of guidance; commercial enjoyment of travel and capital; turnover of a dynamic economy; the transmission of language, culture,

science and civilisation; familiarity with ethnic groups and the cultural, linguistic and civilisational diversity of others; and benefiting from their knowledge and transferring it to one's own people and region (Aghajani & Farahani Fard 2015). The Qur'an encourages man to travel to see the works of the past and learn from them, be thankful for God's blessings, learn about God based on his blessings and creations, understand the mystery of creation, reflect on various issues and the past, learn about the traditions of the past, travel and trade at the same time, circulate capital and assets, and transmit culture, science and civilisation to the people of other lands. Therefore, tourism is extremely important in Islam and has been emphasised by most religions as well. As well, the Infallibles (peace be upon them) have also emphasised travel and have pointed out its various benefits, including health and the vitality of body and soul, acquiring knowledge, familiarity with social customs and ethics of other nations, learning, elimination of sorrow, providing livelihood and getting a job, thinking about divine blessings and healthy recreation and spending of leisure time (Tonekaboni 1998).

Hypothesis: COVID-19 had a significant impact on religious tourism amongst Muslims in Iraq in 2021.

Methodology

The authors evaluated the aim of the research (impact of COVID-19 on religious tourism) by asking 10 questions (Table 2). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used in inferential data analysis, and KMO (Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin) and Bartlett test instruments by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) were exploited to determine the internal consistency of the tools. In addition, a significance below 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Ultimately, the reliability of the tools was confirmed at a Cronbach's alpha of 0.823. This study was conducted on 4500 Muslim managers and staff of restaurants, hotels, grocery stores, clothing stores and souvenir shops around the holy shrines of imams and religious places in Karbala, Najaf, Kufa, Samarra and Kazemi. Data analysis was performed in SPSS following the opinions received from the respondents about COVID-19 and pilgrims and tourists who visited the mentioned regions over the past year to receive products or services and after collecting data to assess the main research question. Meanwhile, sampling adequacy had to be assessed before the data analysis stage based on different occupational groups who were referred to in order to collect data. In the end, the results presented in Table 1 confirmed sampling adequacy, meaning that the collected data can be the basis of analysis. In addition, Cronbach's alpha value indicates the appropriate reliability of the instrument used.

TABLE 1: Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test.

KMO test	0.923
Bartlett's test	
Approximate chi square	11054.406
Significance	0.000
Cronbach's alpha	0.84

TABLE 2: One sample *t*-test of questionnaire.

Components/indexes	Mean (1–5)	Standard deviation	<i>T</i>	Degree of freedom	Significance	Hypothesis status
1 COVID-19 has reduced the income of religious tourists.	4.2126	0.42125	35.673	4999	0.000	Confirmed
2 COVID-19 has led to a reduction in job opportunities created by religious tourists.	4.145	0.51515	27.725	4999	0.000	Confirmed
3 COVID-19 has led to an economic downturn in the handicrafts business.	4.2135	0.50459	27.7528	4999	0.000	Confirmed
4 COVID-19 has negatively affected the mobility of financial capital.	4.0141	0.57171	23.634	4999	0.000	Confirmed
5 COVID-19 has had a negative impact on attracting foreign investment from religious tourists.	4.2463	0.34062	45.165	4999	0.000	Confirmed
6 COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the improvement and development of infrastructure resulting from the arrival of religious tourists.	4.0199	0.57719	21.693	4999	0.000	Confirmed
7 COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the development of export earnings from the arrival of religious tourists.	4.189	0.56601	19.448	4999	0.000	Confirmed
8 COVID-19 has had a negative impact on harnessing existing local capabilities derived from religious tourists.	4.2257	0.56428	20.455	4999	0.000	Confirmed
9 COVID-19 has had a negative impact on employment and activities related to religious tourism.	4.2518	0.482269	19.649	4999	0.000	Confirmed
10 COVID-19 has had a negative impact on part-time employment and service work for religious tourists.	4.289	0.59963	18.622	4999	0.000	Confirmed

Results

Questionnaires were distributed amongst the statistical population to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on religious tourism in Iraq. Table 2 presents the results of 'mean analysis'. This test can determine the status of each religious tourism component in terms of statistical population. Since items were scored based on a 5-point Likert scale, a test value of 3 was applied as the mean level. It is notable that the more the mean score is above the value of 3, the higher and more negative is the impact of COVID-19 on religious tourism. In Table 2, responses are coded from completely disagree (score 1) to completely agree (score 5). Following a number of open interviews made with some of the managers and employees of tourism-related shops and places, it was concluded that COVID-19 had a negative impact on the number of religious tourists and benefits obtained in this area. Therefore, questionnaires were developed to evaluate and determine different aspects of this negative impact. At the end, the benefits of religious tourism were divided into 10 general categories.

According to Table 2, COVID-19 has had negative effects on religious tourism (in general) in Iraq. In addition, it has had a negative impact on various aspects of religious tourism, such that the more the mean value is above 3, the higher the effect of COVID-19 on religious tourism components.

Discussion

In late December 2019, a series of unexplained cases of pneumonia were reported in Wuhan, China. The government and health researchers in China took swift action to control the epidemic and began etiological research. On January 2020, the World Health Organization temporarily named this new virus as new coronavirus (New Coronavirus-2019) (Rezaeian 2020). Despite medical advances, the outbreak of some new infectious diseases has had far-reaching consequences for human life. However, human beings have tried to make it possible to adapt to and reduce

infectious diseases by creating educational and therapeutic developments. But these changes have not been able to protect human beings from the physical and psychological damage of these diseases. For example, the outbreak of a new disease such as COVID-19, which causes respiratory infections, can change the course of people's lives and threaten their physical and mental health. The spread of this virus has posed many challenges in all different dimensions to countries around the world. Even developed countries that claim to have advanced health and social work systems have also encountered difficulties during this time. These problems are not limited to health but have affected all economic and social issues. An important issue in assessing the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak is the time horizon of the virus. If the scenario of a long-term infection with the virus is realised, its economic effects will be completely different from the time when this short-term issue is considered. In Iraq, the outbreak of the virus has left the country's economy in a state of stagnation with uncertainty. One of the sectors whose revenues and expenditures have been disrupted by the outbreak of the coronavirus is tourism services. As a result of the prevalence of this disease, the income of the tourism industry, especially religious tourism, has faced a significant deficit. Because the outbreak of this disease has led to the cessation or reduction of tourism activities in the religious cities of Iraq, the economic exchanges and finally the general business environment have faced many challenges.

Tourism is one of the physical, spiritual and natural needs of human beings and plays an effective role in many of its vital aspects; it has been considered in all divine schools, especially the complete religion of Islam. Islam is a way of life, not just a religion. Islam is a comprehensive religion that deals with all aspects of human existence, both physical and spiritual, and has provided a specific programme and agenda for all their needs. In the view of the Qur'an, not only is tourism a pleasant thing, but also God has considered it as one of the greatest blessings that man should be grateful for and that it should not be neglected. (The Qur'anic Ayats

have been mentioned in the literature of this paper.) This is exactly why it is necessary to pay more attention to the tourism industry in the Islamic holy lands (Bhuiyan et al. 2011). Therefore, in the modern world, the Islamic nation can have something to say about this lucrative industry. In reviewing travelogues and other documents related to the travels of Muslims on earth, the main purpose of the Muslim tourist is to travel, research and study, gain knowledge and learn from scientists of other lands and go on pilgrimage. There are various types of tourism: natural tourism, historical tourism, health tourism, sports tourism and e-tourism. As focused on in this study, religious tourism is a form of tourism that overcomes climate barriers, and the number of tourists and visits to cities and religious centres does not change with seasonal and climate changes. For this type of tourism, the destination alone is not important. The experience begins at the very beginning of leaving the source and encompasses all the paths and events encountered along the way. Religious tourism plays a major role in the social life of Islamic countries. Religious tourism, in addition to its economic and financial aspects, encourages connection with other Islamic societies and interaction between nations and cultures that have common points. Travelling has been a source of human beings' pleasure for several thousand years. In the past, the concept of travelling was merely going to another place for pleasure. With the advancement of societies, however, travelling turned into the tourism industry, which led to the classification of general concepts of the area in various categories, each providing a certain definition of travelling. Religious tourism is one of the sub-branches of the tourism industry and is of paramount importance. These travels are not just for Muslims; followers of other religions can also go on religious trips according to their religious beliefs and the customs of their religion. There are many religious and holy places in the world that belong to various religions. However, religious tourism is mostly observed amongst Muslims owing to the teachings of Islam. For instance, since the beginning of Islam, Muslims around the world have gone to Mecca every year in the lunar month of Dhu al-Hijjah to perform the Hajj. In addition, Shiites and lovers of Ahl al-Bayt go to Iran, Iraq and Syria to visit the family of the Prophet (peace be upon him). In other Islamic countries, such as Egypt and Yemen, there are mosques that date back to the beginning of Islam and attract many tourists.

According to the results of the present study, COVID-19 prevalence has had a negative effect on religious tourism in the holy cities of Iraq. Specifically, the disease has led to the decrease of income from religious tourists ($\mu = 4.2126$), a decrease in job opportunities caused by religious tourism ($\mu = 4.1450$), an economic downturn in the handicrafts business ($\mu = 4.2125$), capital recession ($\mu = 4.0141$), reduction of attraction of foreign assets ($\mu = 4.2463$), a decrease in the improvement and development of infrastructure facilities ($\mu = 4.0199$), reduced export earnings from the arrival of religious tourists ($\mu = 4.1890$), reduced use of existing local capabilities by religious tourists ($\mu = 4.2257$), reduction of

employment and activities related to religious tourism ($\mu = 4.2518$) and a decrease in part-time occupations and service work related to religious tourism ($\mu = 4.2890$). In this regard, the results are analysed in Table 2. Material, spiritual and cultural opportunities generated by the development of religious tourism and the attraction of religious tourists increase the need for attention to religious tourism. Therefore, there is a significant need for proper policy-making and planning in this field. The flourishing of religious tourism between Islamic countries and societies and the travels of Muslim tourists in other Islamic countries have brought Muslim nations closer to each other. It also improves the identification of cultural problems and characteristics of Muslim societies and leads to the recognition of commonalities and differences between cultures. This greatly contributes to achieving a common Islamic culture, establishing unity and solidarity amongst Muslims and reviving the concept of a single Islamic nation. The presence of tourists in Islamic countries neutralises much of the negative propaganda against the Islamic world, which is a very important achievement for the Muslims of the world, showing that many Islamic countries are safe travel destinations, and can politically improve the image of Islamic countries in the world. Therefore, the discussion of the tourism industry helps to introduce Islamic culture and civilisation to other countries from the perspective of civilisation and political culture.

An interesting point about religious tourism is that this type of tourism is not only for places of pilgrimage but also has multiple attractions that are considered, visited and participated in by tourists. For instance, Muslim mosques can sometimes be used as a museum, a gathering place for exhibiting Muslim arts and crafts from Islamic civilisation and a place to hold glorious prayers for tourists. Challenges caused by COVID-19 have been covered in many seminars, websites and cyberspace. However, scientific research in this field will improve the existing insight on the matter. In the present research, we evaluated the effect of COVID-19 on religious tourism scientifically and through field study.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The authors contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Tran Duc Tai, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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