

# Religious Tourism in Jordan:

## Mutual Understanding and Dialogue or Separation and Segregation in the Country's Holy Places?

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### 1. Introduction

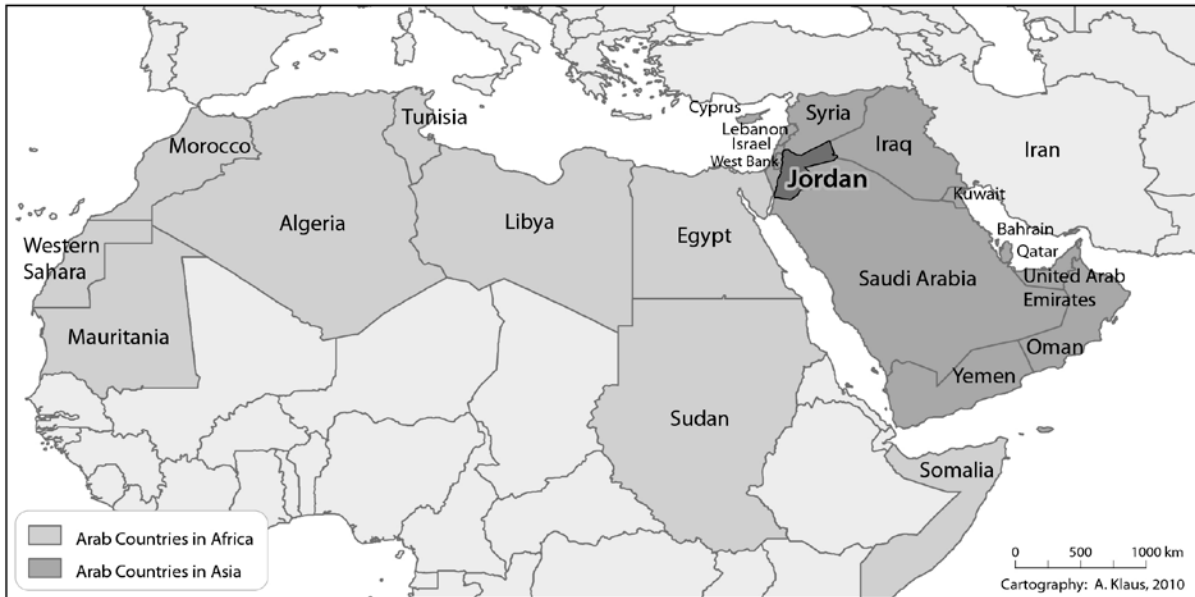
Religious tourism is one of the main pillars of Jordan's tourism industry. In 2005 Jordan received nearly six million tourists; one million out of these six million visited the country's holy sites (according to Kevin Wright, president of the WRTA<sup>1</sup>, 2008). Jordan is blessed by the presence of the holy sites that present the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The country is part of the Holy Land in the Middle East which links the lives of many prophets and messengers.

Religious tourism is seen as a type of cultural tourism whose aim is to get people to discover and to become familiar with holy places, different religions, and with different communities. Religion and tourism share a close relationship: religion often motivates travel and serves as a source of assorted visitor attractions. Tourism and religion are historically related through the institution of pilgrimage. In a way we can say that pilgrimage is the birthplace of a phenomenon, from which later religious tourism emerged the resource. Pilgrimage is a path of faith going through these holy places and sanctuaries where God is said to have revealed himself to mankind

Jordan is located in the heart of the Middle East (see map in fig. 1), with Syria to the North, Saudi Arabia to the South, Iraq to the West, Israel and Palestine to the East.

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<sup>1</sup> WRTA: World Religious Travel Association



**Figure 1:** Jordan lies in the heart of the Middle East. Jordan in its regional context, the MENA Region (Middle East and North Africa)

## 2. Holy places in Jordan: an overview

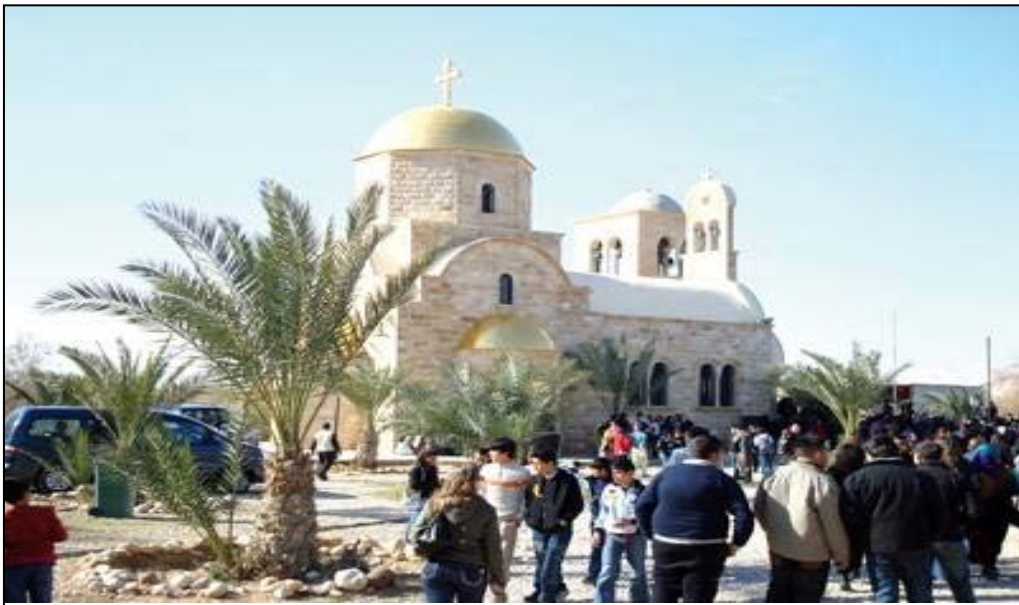
Jordan can be characterized by a large number of pilgrimage places. According to a famous book on the holy sites of Jordan (Fakhry, M., M. Piccirillo & H. Saqqaf 1996) we know that there are more than 40 Islamic sites (see an example in photo 1) pertaining to the companions of the prophet Mohammad who were martyred and buried in Jordan. In fact Jordan has a special place in the history of Islam, as it is the first territory to which Islam spread when it left the Arabian Peninsula. Jordan was also the site of the first contact between Islam and the non-Arab world. In addition to these more than 40 Islamic holy sites there are more than 100 Christian sites (see and example in photo 2) mentioned in the Bible by name. Five of these holy sites were officially recognized as pilgrimage places by the Vatican in 2000.



**Photo 1:** Islamic holy site “Shrine of Abu Obaydah Amer bin Al-Jarrah”  
**Photo by:** Malek Bader

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It is important to know that a lot of these more than 140 sites (see map in fig. 2) have a common religious heritage whether they are of Christian, Islamic or Jewish origin. This common heritage offers the opportunity for these holy sites to be used as a bridge for deeper understanding, better coexistence, more respect and mutual acceptance between religions, cultures and nations.



**Photo 2:** Christian holy site “Baptism Site (Bethany Beyond the Jordan)”  
**Source:** (JTB, 2009) (JTB: Jordan Tourism Board)

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### **3. “Clash of civilizations” or a better understanding between cultures, religions and nations?**

According to Samuel Huntington’s publications on the “Clash of Civilizations” his basic idea is that nowadays conflicts and wars are no longer centered on political or ideological problems. Instead, religious conflicts have become the main reasons for wars and conflicts all over the world.

However and contrary to Huntington we argue that intercultural and interfaith dialogue is nowadays one of the main topics all over the world but especially in the Middle East. In this context faith tourism can play a crucial role as it could be one of the most important concepts contributing to feelings, thoughts and values such as tolerance, dialogue and peace. One of the aims of faith tourism could be to soften and decrease the differences among societies and cultures.

As we have seen, Jordan is covered by many holy places for the three monotheistic religions creating a very dense spiritual atmosphere. It is an important intersection point of civilizations due to the country’s geographical location. It provides a key point where people of different religions live together and where the West meet the East.



- |                                  |                                     |                                   |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 Prophet Issa (Jesus)           | 17 Hazzir                           | 33 Prophet Khadr                  |
| 2 Battle of Yarmouk              | 18 Prophet Shu'ayb (Jethro)         | 34 Prophet Suleiman (Solomon)     |
| 3 Mu'ath bin Jabal               | 19 Bilal bin Rabah                  | 35 Battle Of Mu'tah               |
| 4 Abu al-Darda'a                 | 20 Prophet Issa (Jesus)             | 36 Ja'far bin Abi Taleb           |
| 5 Battle of Fahl                 | 21 Prophet Khadr                    | 37 Zeid ibn al-Harithah           |
| 6 Amer bin Abi Waqqas            | 22 Abd al-Rahman bin Auf            | 38 Abdullah bin Rawaha            |
| 7 Shurhabil bin Husnah           | 23 The Cave of the Sleepers         | 39 Jabir bin Abdullah             |
| 8 Ikrimah bin Abi Jahl           | 24 Prophet Muhammad                 | 40 Al-Harith bin Umayr al-Azdi    |
| 9 Prophet Khadr                  | 25 Prophet Mousa (Moses)            | 41 Farwa bin Amro al-Jadhami      |
| 10 Dirar bin al-Azwar            | 26 Moses' Springs                   | 42 Sheeth                         |
| 11 Prophet Hud                   | 27 Prophet Yahya (John the Baptist) | 43 Abu Mousa al-Ash'ari           |
| 12 Prophet Daoud (David)         | 28 Prophet Muhammad                 | 44 Prophet Haroun (Aaron)         |
| 13 Abu Ubayda Amer Ibn al-Jarrah | 29 Abu Dharr al-Ghifari             | 45 Jabal al-Tahkim                |
| 14 Prophet Yosha' (Joshua)       | 30 Zeid bin Ali bin al-Hussein      | 46 Humayma                        |
| 15 Jadour                        | 31 Prophet Lut (Lot)                | 47 Maysarah bin Masrouq al-Abassi |
| 16 Prophet Ayyoub (Job)          | 32 Prophet Nooh (Noah)              | 48 Uthman's Mosque al Ayla        |

Based on: Ghazi Bir Mohammad (ed., 1994)

**Figure 2:** map of common religious heritage in Jordan

**Source:** Ghazi bin Mohammad 1994

The holy sites in Jordan are open to all visitors and tourists from all nationalities and religions. In fact, in the holy sites of Jordan we can see tourists and pilgrims from many countries of the world and from many religions. This gathering of tourists in the holy places allows cultural interaction between the tourist's and the receiver's culture. And these places offer opportunities for dialogue, convergence and a better mutual understanding between cultures, nations and religions.

This is theory. However, we have to ask about reality. Do these holy places whether they belong to one of the three monotheistic religions or are of common religious heritage- really serve as a basis for a deeper religious understanding, for a better mutual acceptance and the improvement of the dialogue between cultures and religions?

Most of the tourists and visitors who we interviewed or who answered our questionnaires accept the idea that the common religious heritage in the holy sites of Jordan can bring Muslims and Christians closer together and can lead to interfaith dialogue between them. The opening question in the questionnaire was: *“a lot of sacred tourist sites in Jordan have a common religious heritage between the three monotheistic religions. Do you think this common heritage will be a factor in dialogue, convergence and mutual understanding between religions and people?”*

The results which we got from this question were no surprise:

- Nearly 97% off all answers were positive.
- There was no negative answer.
- A bit more than 3% of all answers were neutral or people did not know.

One of the first results from the fieldwork in the holy sites of Jordan could be that dialogue and mutual understanding between visitors and tourists is something natural and without any difficulty.

During the fieldwork in the holy sites we did not only use a written questionnaire, but we tried to do personal interviews with tourists and visitors in these places. For example in the holy place on the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized, in the same day when Pope Benedict 16<sup>th</sup> visited this site we met a group of people apparently Muslims as women in the group were covered by a veil. We talked to a couple and asked this question: This place is a Christian holy site and today the Pope is going to pray in it. What is the reason why you are here as you are Muslims? Their answer was: “we are newly married and we want share with our brothers, the Christians, their happiness and their prayers especially for the peace in the region”.

Another interview was with a tourist woman on Mount Nebo (shown in photo 3). She told us that she is American. Later on, however, we asked the tourist guide about her nationality and he told us she is a Jew from Israel. Most of the tourists from Israel who visit Jordan and the holy places pretend to be Americans and this is, of course, because they are afraid. A lot of the Jordanian people do not accept the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel in 1994. Anyhow, the question was what is your opinion about faith tourism and the opportunity for a better mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence

through the common heritage in the holy sites? Her answer was very positive and we did not have the feeling that she did express what she really thought about it.

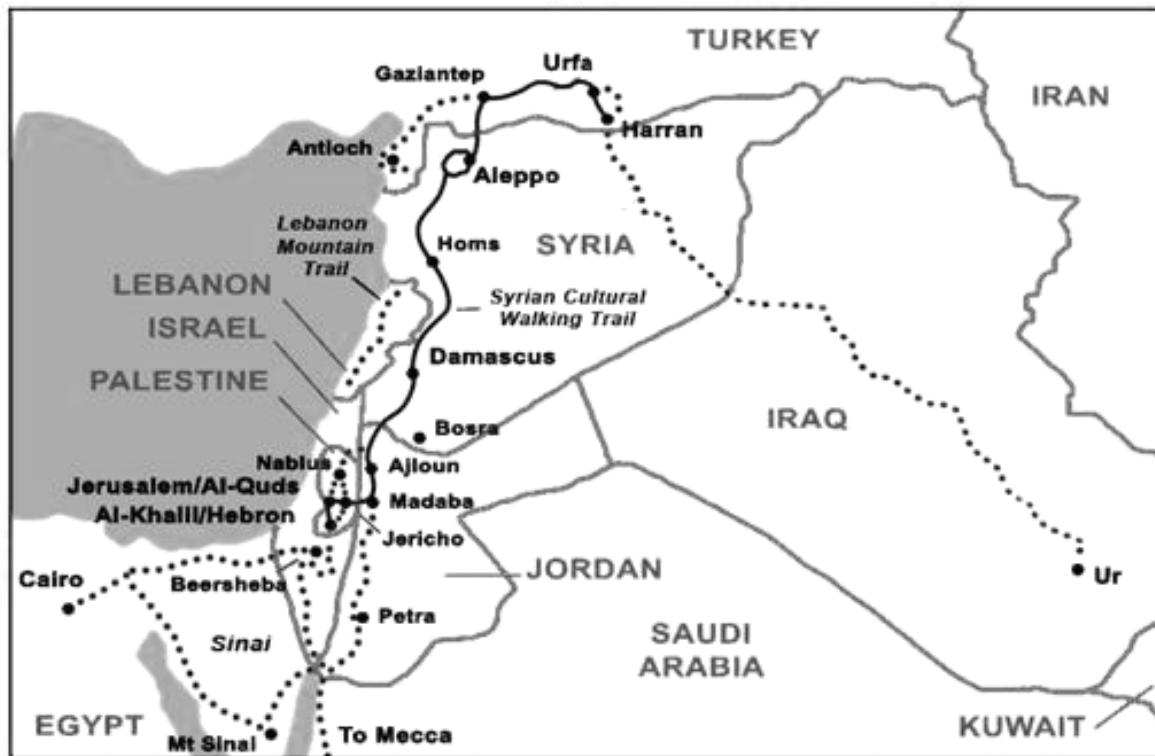


**Photo 3:** Christian Holy Site “Mount Nebo (Moses’ Shrine)

**Photo by:** Malek Bader

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On the other side there are some people in Jordan who are against this view. There is a very prominent example: Jordan in the last two years was cooperating with many institutions to create the Abraham Path in Jordan. The Abraham Path is a route of cultural and religious tourism which follows the footsteps of Abraham through the Middle East (see map in fig3). The prophet Abraham is a common heritage to all three monotheistic religions. Abraham in Arabic is Ibrahim! The story of Abraham’s journey, which has been kept alive for some four thousand years in the landscape and memory of this region, records the origin of a spiritual tradition shared by more than three billion people in the world today. The main aim of this path is to reinforce the dialogue between the three monotheistic religions and to promote the cultural heritage in the region.



— Route of 2006 Harvard Study Tour, and 2008 Kellogg Fellows Tour  
 .... Future Cultural Routes

# ABRAHAM PATH



However, the Islamic Brothers (in Arabic: Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn) and some professional unions in Jordan asked the society not to accept but to refuse this initiative and not to participate in this initiative. They called this initiative a tourist trip involving Muslims, Christians and Jews to bring them closer. They are against it because for them it is another step of normalization with Israel which they do not accept at all. Therefore they asked the official and popular sides in Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Turkey to prevent this “sin” and to isolate everybody who seeks normalization with Israel. For them Abraham Path is a Zionist exploitation of this sacred and blessed land which they will never accept.

And there is another important aspect. There are many Muslim people who are against the expression of “religious tourism”. They argue that it is not a good thing to combine the two words “religion” and “tourism”. Their point of view is that tourism is for entertainment and amusement, but religion is



something serious, sensitive and emotional. Therefore it is not an acceptable expression for them at all. They believe in pilgrimage (in Arabic: Hajj) and Umrah, but this has nothing to do with tourism. On the other hand there is another and decisively larger group of Muslim people in Jordan who accept this expression and consider religious tourism as a good source for cultural and mutual understanding. For them religious tourism can play an important role to define Islam and may be used as a means to bring Islamic countries and other countries in the world together out of cultural and humanitarian reasons.

We were lucky to interview the director of religious tourism in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Jordan. His opinion about religious tourism: “It is the key to activate tourism in the Middle East because of the richness of this area covered with many holy sites referring to the three monotheistic religions”.

According to the director’s opinion the problem that Jordan faces in the holy sites is a lack of services concerning hotels, restaurants, cafes, souvenir shops and many others. In general and according to the director Jordan’s public until today does not seem to accept the idea of commercialization in the holy places. However, if these places are very important for the interfaith dialogue and a better mutual understanding of people, religions and cultures better services and improved infrastructure is indispensable. Better services and infrastructure may cause the tourists and visitors to stay longer and this could help to create and improve opportunities for an intensified contact and more dialogue between the tourists themselves and between tourists and local communities.

However, concerning commercialization in the holy sites it was interesting to hear in the interview with the same director that he was against commercialization in the sense of turning these places into markets for buying and selling. He argued that these places should be kept as religious heritage places. However, he was not against providing these places with the basic and necessary services in order to make the tourists spend more time and stay longer in the holy places. But from our point of view, through observations and according to publications concerning religious tourism, Jordan until now has not found a solution how to combine commercialization and spirituality in the holy places.

On the whole and as we have mentioned above, the majority of tourists in the holy sites accept the idea of convergence, mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue. A small minority of people interviewed refuses this idea but most of these people came only for a short period of time just to see the biblical sites and then leave. We can find the same situation concerning official authorities and local societies in Jordan: Most of them accept the idea and some of them refuse it. However, there is

one crucial aspect which we have mentioned above: This is when it comes to talk about the concept of convergence and dialogue with the Jews in the holy places.

Although holy sites may be taken as a means to reduce tensions and promote a peaceful living together in the region, coexistence between Jews on the one side and Christians and Muslims faces many obstacles in the holy sites. The opportunities for the Jews concerning mutual understanding and coexistence with the Arabs whether they are Muslims or Christians through religious or faith tourism in the holy sites of Jordan is low in comparison with the opportunities between Muslims and Christians themselves. There are many reasons for this:

1. The conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians as well as the Israeli occupation of the Arab land in Palestine is one of the reasons why these opportunities are very low or almost non-existing.
2. More than 40% of Jordan's population are of Palestinian origin and they still have a lot of problems with Israel.
3. Most of Israeli tourists who visit Jordan pretend to be Americans and this makes the coexistence and mutual understanding difficult.
4. The mental image in the minds of Jordanians whether they are Christians or Muslims about Israel is that Israel is an occupier of Arab homeland in Palestine.

In addition to this conflict between Israel and the Arab world which is central to the whole region and which is also reflected in the field of tourism, we have to report another conflict which takes place not between Jews and Arabs whether they are Muslims or Christians but among the Muslim population itself. We were lucky to make an interview with the director of Islamic Affairs in Kerak south of Amman the capital. This director is responsible for the Islamic holy places in al-Mazar al-Janubi that are visited by Muslims either from Shiaa or from Sunna. He reported about many problems between Sunna and Shiaa people related to religious tourism and visiting the holy sites. As a consequence he argued that "Religious tourism in these holy sites should not be an aim of the government in Jordan". And he was very critical concerning commercialization in the holy places because he did not like the idea that visitors and tourists stay longer. In other words he tried to avoid problems between of different groups of Muslim religion. For a better understanding: Muslims in Jordan are Sunnis. Shiaa people ,however, have come to Jordan from Iraq during the last few years because of the bad situation there.

Again results of our fieldwork until now seem to show that we have far more examples, proofs and observations which demonstrate that the common religious heritage is a strong basis of coexistence and mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians.

On the site near the Jordan River where Jesus Christ was baptized by John the Baptist a meeting took place some time ago where specialists for tourism development on the one side and for religious affairs on the other side took part. They agreed on a common decision to build a small Islamic shrine – to be the “shrine of Christ”- and a conference centre in the vicinity of the site which is one of the most holy places for Christians in Jordan and over the world. It symbolizes for the fraternity and coexistence between Muslims and Christians. The conference centre will be specially constructed for meetings dealing with intercultural and interfaith aspects in the world.

And also in Madaba (the city near Mount Nebo with the shrine of Moses and with the Orthodox Church that contains the oldest map of the Holy Land) Christians and Muslims agreed a few years ago to build a mosque under the remarkable name ‘Jesus Christ Mosque’ (see photo 4) financed by both sides, Muslims and Christians. In the mean time the construction of the mosque is finished and it is a good proof for the coexistence between Muslims and Christians.



**Photo 4:** Jesus Christ Mosque (in Arabic: Masjed Almaseeh Issa ibin Mariam)

**Source:** <http://i43.tinypic.com/34zak4z.jpg>, accessed November 2009

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#### **4. Summary and Outlook**

Coexistence and mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians are a characteristic feature in Jordan for a long period of time. This can be derived from the fact, too, that mosques and churches are placed beside each other, which was positively mentioned by the late Pope Benedict XVI during his

last visit to Jordan 2009 (see photo 5). Muslims and Christians use this common religious heritage as a basis for cooperation and when trying to solve problems.

In general, holy tourist sites destinations may seen as laboratories of knowledge, providing visitors and tourists with opportunities to build upon shared understanding and dialogue despite differences of politics and basic religious questions. The holy sites are places of meeting, connecting people of all faiths and cultures and inviting everyone to remember our common origin and to respect our cultural differences as well as to recognize our shared humanity. Intercultural and interfaith dialogue is a must today especially in the Near and Middle East region.



**Photo5:** King Abdullah II ibn al-Hussein welcomes the late pope Benedict XVI during his visit to Jordan 08/5-11/5/2009

**Source:**[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_jR\\_fpG0a64Q/SgSUMJKq5ml/AAAAAAAAAnI/D7yFPPMQheE/s400/Pope+Visits+Jordan.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_jR_fpG0a64Q/SgSUMJKq5ml/AAAAAAAAAnI/D7yFPPMQheE/s400/Pope+Visits+Jordan.jpg); accessed November 2009

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