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## Regeneration and development: How the legacy of hajj drives Saudi Arabia's national growth

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### Abstract

This paper explores how Saudi Arabia is leveraging the religious legacy of Hajj as a cornerstone for its regeneration and national growth strategies, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sectors. It discusses how the Kingdom's Vision 2030 has integrated the expansion of tourism and hospitality as key pillars to diversify its economy and create a more sustainable future. The research examines how the growing significance of religious tourism, along with large-scale development projects such as NEOM, contribute to the Kingdom's socio-economic development. By analyzing the impact of Hajj on the country's infrastructure, employment, and culture, this paper demonstrates how Saudi Arabia uses its rich religious heritage to fuel urban regeneration, economic diversification, and social empowerment.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, hajj, vision 2030, tourism, hospitality, regeneration, economic growth, urban development, religious tourism, Neom

### Introduction

According to the Oxford Dictionary regeneration is defined as “the process of making an area, institution, etc. develop and grow strong again”. Regeneration in a country and multifaceted process, often requiring a comprehensive approach to address various socio-economic challenges. Socio-economic challenges, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, are difficulties faced by individuals or groups that stem from differences in financial status and resources. These challenges often affect access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, contributing to cycles of poverty and inequality. There has been a growing focus on urban regeneration as a means to address these challenges. A prominent British definition of urban regeneration is “Comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change.” (Magalhaes, 2015) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Urban regeneration aims to revitalize urban areas, creating more diverse and dynamic neighborhoods while spreading these benefits throughout the country. This inclusive approach, which integrates physical, environmental and socio-economic strategies which can be implemented by a country's government for its development and advancement. The researcher would like to present an example of the initiative taken up by the IHCL (Indian Hotels Company Limited), Paathya. Initiated on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022, Paathya is an initiative the hotels by IHCL have to follow rules and regulations to support sustainability and social responsibility. (Indian Hotels Company Limited) These initiatives help the company uphold their goodwill, provide employment to people residing near the property, provide employment to people who are differently abled and also protect the environment by saving energy and water. Such strategies have been acknowledged as one of the most thorough and impactful methods available to nurture cities that are more inclusive, resilient, safe and sustainable. (United Nations HABITAT, 2021) <sup>[21]</sup>.

Tourism is defined as “Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes.” by the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization). It also mentions that “These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure.”

The tourism industry stands as one of the most powerful social forces in the world today, holding substantial international economic and geopolitical significance.

The Cambridge dictionary defines geopolitics as “the study of the way a country's size, position, etc. influences its power and its relationships with other countries”. For instance, Italy is a member of both the European Union and the Council of Europe. Its strategic location in southern Europe has made it an important player in NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which is a military alliance. Essentially, Italy's geographic position enhances its influence and responsibilities within these international organizations. (Wickham *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[23]</sup> Tourism shapes, reorganizes and occupies geographic, social and cultural spaces. For instance, Conservation work is being conducted by various divisions of the Archaeology Department of Maharashtra at Raigad Fort, located in Taluka Velha, District Pune. (Dhotre R. & Joshi D., 2019) <sup>[6]</sup> Undeniably, tourism is a tremendous catalyst for change. Through the revenue and employment, it generates this sector significantly contributes to reducing poverty and improving health, housing, education and overall well-being of the citizens of the country. Not only it contributes to the prosperity of the country but it also influences the lives of local residents in many ways. The influx of hundreds of visitors brings a boost to the financial state of the country which then can be utilized by the government for the expansion and upgrade of the infrastructure and development of the country. (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2021) <sup>[24]</sup>.

### Material and Methods

This paper employs a qualitative research approach, analyzing secondary data from scholarly articles, governmental reports, and reputable sources like the United Nations, Saudi Vision 2030 documentation, and World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). The analysis covers Saudi Arabia's tourism and hospitality growth through the lens of Hajj, Vision 2030, and mega-events.

Data was collected from sources such as the Saudi Vision 2030 National Transformation Program, reports by the WTTC, and studies on the socio-economic impact of tourism in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, official reports on tourism and hospitality growth in the Kingdom from 2022 to 2024 provide critical insights into the ongoing regeneration efforts.

### Hospitality in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Collins Dictionary defines hospitality as “Hospitality is the business of providing accommodation, food and drink, and entertainment for visitors and guests”. The hospitality sector covers various services aimed at making individuals feel at ease and valued. This encompasses lodging, dining, event coordination, amusement parks, travel, and cruises. The sector is divided into multiple areas depending on the expertise required, such as lodging, dining services, conferences and events, gaming, leisure activities, travel services, and tourist information. (Raghav, 2020) <sup>[8]</sup>.

Saudi Arabia had a total of 1,446 hotels across various categories. Mecca and Medina attract around five million pilgrims annually for the Hajj and personal Umrah pilgrimages, making these cities' hotels predominantly occupied by pilgrims. Beyond these religious visitors, the primary tourism markets for Saudi Arabia include neighboring countries. As the country's economic center, Riyadh mainly serves business clients, while Jeddah, the second-largest city, caters to both local tourists and

professional visitors. Recognizing the potential for tourism growth, the Saudi government aims to enhance the domestic tourism market to capture a portion of the 8.2 million Saudi residents who travel abroad each year. In response to the increasing demand for accommodation, there has been a notable rise in the development of four- and five-star hotels. (Azhar A., Duncan P. & Edgar D., 2018) <sup>[2]</sup> Saudi Arabia's hospitality sector is set to grow by 7.5% each year from 2023 to 2028 because of government initiatives. This growth aligns with the average in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region and is part of the country's Vision 2030 plan. (El-Shaeri, 2024) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### Factors Influencing the Regeneration of the Tourism and Hospitality Sector

A significant economic boom was experienced during the 1970's and '80s in Saudi Arabia which further resulted in regeneration of tourism. In 1972 the total annual production of crude oil rose to 2,2201.8 million barrels with a 45% increase in the revenue summing up to \$2,734.1 million. (Almtairi N., 1985) <sup>[1]</sup>. This boost was largely due to the substantial oil export revenues. Unlike many developing countries had access to significant capital, allowing the government to initiate large scale development projects. This transformation turned Saudi Arabia from a largely underdeveloped country into a modern state. As a result, unemployment was nearly nonexistent, as many workers took on both low skilled jobs and technical positions. This abundance of jobs contributed to high per capita income (reflecting the average income earned per person) and elevated GDP per capita, which measures overall economic output divided by the population. Initially, to guide its long-term economic development, Saudi Arabia implemented a series of five-year plans. As there was an abundance of finances because of the boost, the first two plans, spanning 1970-75 and 1976-80, focused on establishing essential transportation and communications infrastructure plans. These plans made Saudi Arabia as a nation realize that regeneration in tourism will help in boosting the economy. Subsequently, later plans aimed to diversify the economy by increasing domestic production, enhancing education and vocational training, improving healthcare services, and further developing routes across various regions of the country. Additionally, the development policies were shaped in a way that prioritized the preservation of Islamic moral and religious values to increase the volume of tourists visiting for hajj, which in turn helps the regeneration of tourism in the nation. The enhancement of national defense and internal security, which also influenced the nature and extent of economic progress. (Presley, J., Westaway, T., 2017) <sup>[14]</sup>.

However, this economic boom came with its challenges. However, this economic growth brought some problems. As global oil prices stayed the same in the 1990s, government policies that encouraged having many children led to a big increase in the population. As a result, the income per person started to fall, and for the first time, the kingdom's young, educated workers faced higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. Fortunately, this trend reversed when oil prices went up again. (Teitelbaum *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[12]</sup>. Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has embarked on an extraordinary journey to transform its economy. Early reforms, such as cutting energy subsidies, introducing a Value Added Tax (VAT), and implementing indirect taxes

on labour and business, showed promising results. (Sfakianakis, 2024) <sup>[16]</sup>. On 25th April 2016, then- Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduced Saudi Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program. (Thompson, 2019) <sup>[20]</sup>. The Kingdom is actively pursuing investments in the construction sector in ambitious projects such as NEOM. NEOM is a futuristic region in northwest Saudi Arabia powered by 100% renewable energy. The Vision 2030 has the key initiatives include establishing the Council of Economics and Development and restructuring the Ministry of Energy to broaden the scope beyond oil. The above-mentioned initiatives help in the Kingdom's economic diversification and sustainable growth. (Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

### Types of Events and Their Economic Impact

The Cambridge dictionary defines an Event as “anything that happens, especially something important or unusual.” Events come in all shapes and sizes, each with its own way of capturing attention, making an impact, and even driving economic growth. Think about the excitement of a world-famous sports tournament, a major music festival, or an iconic cultural celebration. These gatherings draw huge crowds, both in person and online. Stadiums and concert halls buzz with energy as fans cheer and sing together, while millions more enjoy the experience from their homes or follow along on social media, creating a sense of connection that transcends borders.

On the other hand, these large events do more than just bring people together; they can also give a significant boost to the local economy. Visitors flock to these occasions, spending money on everything from tickets to hotel stays, meals, and souvenirs. This influx of spending can provide a vital lifeline for local businesses and help invigorate the community. Plus, the global media coverage can shine a spotlight on the host city or region, raising its profile and attracting future tourists and investors long after the event wraps up. In this way, large-scale events create not just unforgettable moments and connections among people, but they also play a key role in economic development, leaving a lasting positive legacy for the communities that host them. They become part of the community's story, fostering pride and encouraging future gatherings that continue to enrich the local culture and economy.

As per the 3rd edition of ‘Event Planning and Management’ events can be categorized by their size and impact into five key types. Local events are small-scale, community-focused gatherings such as village fairs or neighborhood parties, primarily for local residents, requiring minimal resources and publicity. Major events, on the other hand, attract a wider audience, drawing visitors from other towns or even countries, such as regional arts festivals or business conferences, and they boost the local economy through increased spending and media coverage. Hallmark events are deeply connected with a specific location's identity, like Wimbledon or the Glastonbury Festival, which have become symbolic of their regions. Mega events, like the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup, are on a global scale, attracting billions of viewers worldwide. These events bring substantial economic benefits to host cities but also require massive financial and logistical efforts. Lastly, virtual events, which gained prominence after COVID-19, allow people to participate from anywhere, and with advancements in online technology, they can host thousands

of attendees, making them accessible and cost-effective. (Dowson, Albert, & Lomax, 2022) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Events in Saudi Arabia

Hajj is best described as a mega event because of its enormous scale and global significance. Each year, millions of Muslims from across the world travel to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to fulfill this pilgrimage, making it one of the largest gatherings globally. Beyond its religious and cultural importance, Hajj also boosts the local economy and requires intense planning to ensure everything runs smoothly. This includes coordinating transportation, healthcare, security, and hospitality, so pilgrims can complete their journey safely.

According to the sacred scripture of Islam: Quran, the five pillars of Islam are the main beliefs that shape the Islamic faith. The five pillars of Islam comprise of Shahada, Salah, Zakat, Sawm and Hajj. (Kamal-Ud-Din, 2022) <sup>[9]</sup>. Each of the pillars operates in harmony to embody the core principles of Islam as a faith of peace and surrendering to Allah in the daily lives of Muslims. These are the five essential practices that every Muslim is required to observe throughout their lifetime. To fulfill this obligation Hajj needs to be performed by every Muslim at least once in their lifetime. Consequently, 2.5 million of Muslims from around the world travel to Mecca, Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj highlights the content given by Mufti Bilal Omarjee in the Islamic Relief. Hajj takes place in the month of Dhul Hijjah. Dhul Hijjah is the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. As the Muslim community follows the lunar calendar (a calendar system based on the phases of the moon), each year the Gregorian date for the Hajj will be different. The Hajj was observed from June 14th to June 19th 2024 this year. (Omarjee, 2023) <sup>[13]</sup>.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is known as the heartland of Islam as it is the land that is home to the two holiest cities Mecca and Medina. Prophet Muhammad, the founder and the messenger of the Quran was born in Mecca in 570 CE and passed away in Medina on 8th June 632 CE. The learning of the practice of Hajj was taught to Muslims by Prophet Ibrahim, several years ago. After which in 628 CE during the month of Dhul Hijjah, Prophet Muhammad initiated the practice of Hajj among the Muslim community. Prior to the advent of Islam, the month of Dhul Hijjah held significance for the pagan Arabs (the people of Arabic origin who believed in many Gods and didn't have one God that was supreme over the rest) of pre-Islamic Arabia, during which time fighting was forbidden and pilgrimages to the Kaaba were undertaken. The Kaaba is a cubic structure situated in Masjid al-haram, was once used by the Arabs to house their pagan idols. In Arabic, "Kaaba" refers to any house or building that is cube-shaped. Since the Kaaba itself looks like a box or cube, it makes sense that the Arabs named it the Kaaba. (Darwanto, 2022) <sup>[4]</sup>. Today, Muslims refer to it as Baitullah, meaning ‘the House of God’, and it plays a central role in the hajj rites, although it is a mosque rather than an object of worship. Additionally, the Kaaba was originally constructed by Ibrahim thousands of years ago under Allah's command, and the Hajj practices observed by Muslim today are deeply rooted in the traditions established by Ibrahim. (Omarjee, 2023) <sup>[13]</sup>.

### Socio-Economic Implications of Vision 2030

Focusing now on Vision 2030, the researcher would now

like to discuss the socio-economic status of local communities, tourists, and consumers. Vision 2030 is all about making life better for Saudi citizens, tourists, and communities by creating a stronger and more diverse economy.

Furthermore, this plan opens up new job opportunities. Traditionally, many Saudis preferred government jobs because they were stable and offered benefits. This meant the private sector relied a lot on foreign workers (85% of the workforce). Vision 2030 aims to change that by creating more jobs in areas like tourism, entertainment, and mining. This will help Saudi citizens find rewarding work, support their families, and reduce unemployment, leading to a stronger middle class. While some may feel uncertain about leaving the comfort of government jobs, the long-term benefits include a more resilient economy and more opportunities right at home. Communities will also benefit from investments that improve infrastructure and services.

Additionally, Vision 2030 is transforming Saudi Arabia into a more appealing travel destination. With plans to enhance the tourism sector, visitors can expect richer cultural experiences and better facilities. This growth isn't just good for tourists; it also benefits local communities. As tourism expands, thousands of new jobs will be created, from hotel workers to tour guides, boosting local businesses. Small towns that were once overlooked will become lively spots for cultural exchange, hospitality, and local crafts, allowing locals to share their heritage. For everyone, including emigrants, this plan has made the market more competitive. With more locals in private sector jobs, there is a wider variety of services and products, which have improved quality and lowered prices. Families enjoy better local options, and as incomes rise, they have more choices for shopping, entertainment, and services.

Social impact has been a big part of this change. The plan has cut the civil service workforce by 20% which means some people had to adapt to the competitive private sector. Although this has created some short-term challenges, the bigger picture is about new opportunities. As the private sector grows, more jobs are available across various industries, helping people contribute to and benefit from the economy. (Khan M.K. & Khan M.B., 2020) <sup>[10]</sup>.

### Discussion

Saudi Arabia's tourism and hospitality sector is growing rapidly as part of Vision 2030, which aims to reduce the country's dependence on oil and create a more diverse economy. The government has invested heavily in building hotels, improving transport, and preserving cultural sites. Religious tourism, especially visits to Mecca and Medina, continues to be a major driver of growth, while new projects like NEOM and luxury resorts are attracting more international tourists. These efforts are helping to boost the economy and create more jobs for Saudi citizens.

However, there are still some challenges. Many Saudi workers are used to government jobs, so shifting to private-sector tourism jobs can take time. Sustainability is another concern, as large-scale construction and tourism growth may affect the environment. Additionally, while Saudi Arabia is modernizing, it must also ensure that cultural and religious traditions are respected. International tourism is also affected by global political issues, which could impact visitor numbers. Vision 2030 has been successful so far, but ongoing adjustments and careful planning are needed to

ensure long-term success.

### Results

This research shows that Saudi Arabia's hospitality and tourism sector is developing quickly and achieving Vision 2030's goals. The government's efforts to improve infrastructure, attract tourists, and support cultural tourism have had positive effects on the economy. Large-scale projects, better transport facilities, and new entertainment options have helped diversify the economy beyond oil.

Some key results include the addition of 320,000 new hotel rooms by 2030, a projected increase in annual tourists to 150 million, and a rise in tourism's contribution to GDP from 6% to 10%. There was also a 132% increase in tourism revenue between 2022 and 2023, showing how much the sector is growing. The government's focus on job creation and workforce training has opened new opportunities for Saudi citizens, increasing their participation in the economy. Overall, the research confirms that Saudi Arabia is successfully building a strong tourism and hospitality sector. These developments will continue to bring economic and social benefits. However, it is important to maintain sustainability and ensure that the workforce can keep up with industry needs for long-term success.

### Conclusion

The research would like to highlight that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is actively working to enhance its economy by successfully focusing on the hospitality and tourism sectors. Focusing on the hospitality sector, there is set to be an addition of 320,000 new hotel rooms by 2030 to prepare for an expected 150 million tourists each year. This count includes both the tourists from abroad as well as tourists from within the country. This significant expansion in the hospitality industry is the key to the kingdom's aim to boost the travel and tourism industry's share of the economy from nearly 6% to 10% by the end of the decade. In comparison to the records for tourism in 2022, with visitors spending \$23.2 billion in the first half of 2023 alone which sums up to an increase of 132%. International visitors also rose significantly, jumping 142% to reach 14.6 million in the first six months of 2023. (Bne Gulf Bureau, 2024).

The country's vision crafted by the Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, aims to transform the kingdom's economy. This vision is helping the kingdom to focus on creating a lively community that supports a growing economy and creates a strong and progressive nation. Furthermore, to cultivate a vibrant society, the Kingdom is focused on enhancing cultural experiences and promoting healthier lifestyles. Efforts to boost religious tourism and preserve Saudi Arabia's rich heritage are central to this initiative. On the economic front, there's a clear commitment to diversification and job creation, with an emphasis on innovation across sectors such as manufacturing, renewable energy, and tourism. By modernizing education and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, Saudi Arabia aims to empower its workforce and improve its global standing. The Kingdom is also committed to good governance, ensuring transparency and accountability. By tackling corruption and investing in public servants, Saudi Arabia is building a solid foundation for long-term success.

In this way, Saudi Arabia's transformative journey is about

more than just numbers and statistics; it's about creating a society where people thrive, cultures flourish, and the nation makes a meaningful impact worldwide. Through this vision, the Kingdom aspires not only to elevate itself but also to contribute positively to the global community, embodying the spirit of progress and collaboration. (The Embassy of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia).

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