

Middle East Members Meet as UNWTO Opens New Office in Riyadh

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, May 28 2021 - *Members of the UNWTO Regional Commission for the Middle East have agreed to work on the creation of harmonized protocols to support the resumption of regional travel in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.*

The 13 Members of the UNWTO Regional Commission for the Middle East met in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the day after the United Nations specialised agency for tourism celebrated the official opening of a UNWTO Regional Office in the Middle East. High on the agenda was adopting a coordinated approach to **developing unified protocols for safe and responsible travel** throughout the region.

The UNWTO Middle East Member States have agreed to work together on core initiatives intended to harmonize travel protocols and reinvigorate regional travel through:

1. Developing a common framework to reopen international borders;
2. Creating approved Public Health Corridors between destinations to promote specific tourism experiences and relaunch hotspot tourism destinations;
3. Implementing a common digital health solution to facilitate travellers' experience through interoperability and blockchain as technologies to help develop common standards; and
4. Working to implement the IATA-UNWTO destination tracker, a monitoring system to track health data, regulations and movements across borders and to protect the health and welfare of the region's 450 million inhabitants.

Historic week for Middle East tourism

UNWTO Secretary-General, Zurab Pololikashvili, presented his report to the Regional Commission. The report outlined how UNWTO had worked with all Members and Affiliate Members across the region, most notably supporting them in their unique and shared response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This agreement opens a new chapter in regional tourism across the Middle East and sets a standard of collaboration for other regions," said Zurab Pololikashvili, UNWTO Secretary General. "Nations around the world are struggling to overcome the pandemic that has such a devastating impact on the global tourism sector. The more countries

seek to follow an independent path out of the crisis, the longer it will take to rebuild the millions of livelihoods affected. It is only through unity and collaboration across borders that we can move beyond these dark times and make the benefits of tourism available to the world once more.

His Excellency Ahmed bin Aqil Al-Khateeb, Minister of Tourism of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also addressed the Regional Commission, held during an historic week for the Kingdom, UNWTO and tourism in the Middle East. He said: "Saudi Arabia is proud to have played a role in this critical announcement, which will create a new path forward for the Middle East tourism sector, not only in recovering from the coronavirus pandemic but in building a new regional culture of collaboration and coordination for tourism across the Middle East."

Against the backdrop of the **landmark opening of the new UNWTO Regional Office in Riyadh** nominations and elections to the statutory organs of UNWTO and their subsidiary bodies were also held, fulfilling UNWTO's commitment to protocol even in challenging times. **Egypt was voted to serve as the Chair of the Regional Commission for the Middle East** for 2021-23, following on from the United Arab Emirates whose two year-term will end at the upcoming UNWTO General Assembly in Marrakesh in October. Additionally, the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia put forward its candidacy to host World Tourism Day** when it rotates back to the Middle East region in 2023. Member States will be asked to ratify the candidacy at the General Assembly.

World Bank collaboration

At the same time, UNWTO continues to advance another key priority, promoting **investment in tourism**. In Riyadh, UNWTO announced a new landmark collaboration with the **World Bank** Group and the Saudi Ministry of Tourism. A new Memorandum of Understanding will see the three organizations collaborate on the activation of the Tourism Community Initiative and work towards the establishment of a global Multi-Donor Trust Fund exclusively devoted to tourism.

Focus on education

UNWTO and the Ministry of Tourism of Saudi Arabia signed an agreement to scale up the UNWTO Tourism Online Academy, which counts on the support of IE University. The main objective will be the creation of 50 online open courses available in five languages, with leading academic institutions providing specific content to train and certify more than 30,000 professionals across the Middle East.

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