

# Corona Pandemic Impact on Saudi Arabia's Tourism and Travel Sector

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## Abstract

Tourism and travel are one of the most essential sectors of the world economy. Saudi Arabian vision 2030 is to increase its contribution to become the next tourism leader in the Middle East. This paper focuses on the impact assessment of Covid-19 on the tourism and travel sector in Saudi Arabian. An analysis of the statistical information is studied to see the changes that occur over 2020 since the outbreak has begun. This paper provides insights into the decline in tourism and travel sectors. Domestic pilgrim's number fell by around 98% between 2019 and 2020. This decrease is caused by precautionary measures taken by Saudi authorities especially physical distancing to minimize contamination by COVID-19. According to the statistics on expenditure on domestic tourist trips for religious purposes, a clear drop in this revenue between 2019 and 2020 can be estimated at around 44% which is equivalent to about 6,898 million Riyals. The policy and strategies implemented in Saudi Arabia led to better control of Covid-19 in Saudi Arabia and reflect the different situations in Domestic tourism. According to the statistic of domestic tourism, domestic tourism demand declined by 12% in 2020 registering a total of 42 million trips VS 47.8 million trips in 2019. Tourism revenue decreased by about 30% (43 billion Riyal in 2020 VS 61 billion Riyal in 2019). The evolution of foreign pilgrims' numbers from 2014 up to 2020 where we can notice a significant drop (zero foreign pilgrims in 2020) which decreased by 100% in 2020 compared with last year (about 1,9 million foreign pilgrims). The COVID-19 Pandemic hurts the international tourism demand, according to the statistic, the inbound arrivals to KSA (the most important direction for Muslims) in 2020 decreased by 94% compared with 2019 (17.5 million Trips in 2019 VS 4.1 million Trips in 2020). International tourism revenue decreased by 81% in 2020 (20.1 billion Riyal in 2020 VS 103.4 billion Riyal in 2019).

## Keywords:

*Saudi Arabian, Covid-19, Impact, Tourism*

## 1. Introduction

The pandemic of the COVID19 is an emerging infectious disease caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. It appears on November 17, 2019, in the province of Hubei and more precisely in the city of Wuhan in China and it continues, today, to spread all over the world.

[1] officially declares a public health emergency on January 30, 2020 and classifies the COVID19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. In total, this is about 200 countries that are affected by this health crisis, with fifteen more households per 100,000 patients. On June 08, 2020,

more than 7 million people have been infected and nearly 403,000 died.

As of the time of writing this manuscript (01/6/2022), over 535,863,950 COVID-19 cases have been recorded, death reported is more than 6,314,972, and recovered is over 518,938,854 across the world.

Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, more than 783,076 COVID-19 cases have been recorded, and death reported is about 9,183 and recovered is reached 764,094.

Around the world, measures of physical distancing and travel restrictions were introduced to slow the spread of the pandemic. These response measures, combined with the loss of life and other impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, have generated significant economic and social shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic puts the world under considerable pressure, affecting everyone's lives. Many measures taken to flatten the infection curve include quarantine, curfew, containment, travel restrictions, and economic and social activities restrictions. The impact of the COVID-19 is devastating for the global economy and jobs.

[3] affirmed that all sectors (agriculture, petroleum and associated products, manufacturing firms, hospitality, the housing sector, education, aviation and tourism, sports industry, food sector, information technology, etc.) were all affected. According to [4], [5], and [6], Nigeria, concluded that the construction sector was the most affected sector by the pandemic.

Other authors such as [7] and [8] studied the environmental, health, and economic impact of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic affects all sectors of the world, and the negative effect on the international economy is growing. There may be a dip in the world increase rate below 2% in 2020 if this pandemic is not limited as a warning [9].

The fear of economic shares going down is escalating, which might result in a calamity of companies shutting down [10]. Covid-19 flawed many economies, including Saudi Arabia.

In his research, [11] affirmed that the present pandemic causes a wider menace to the international economy after the great crisis of 2008–2009. They envisage a reduction in the international economy under 2% for this year, and that will maybe cost in the order of USD 1 trillion, compared with what people were expected back in September 2019".

They also announced that the international economic supply-chain cessation started in China.

The general equilibrium model was used to find that the Chinese economy was severely disrupted and put forward seven possible scenarios of the pandemic [12].

Based on many studies like [13], [14], [15], in the Indian economy, COVID-19 in-duces serious damage and can cause a loss of 4% to real Indian gross domestic product.

[16] discovered a disconnection–anxiety link to be stronger in nations with more COVID-19 cases. The authors studied 62 nations across the world, including KSA. The authors show that psychological anxiety is positively connected with social isolation but varies from region to region.

few recent studies identified the impacts of the pandemic on the various sections of the Saudi Arabian economy and categorized its causes into three levels, the very severely affected sector, the severely affected sector, and the moderately affected sector. For example, tourism and air transport sectors the health and social work sector is considered as the severely affected, whilst recreation, cultural and sporting activities, are considered the very severely affected. The latter is negatively affected by given national and international restrictions of movement within and outside KSA [17, 18, 19].

Tourism was severely affected by the restriction measures adopted to stem the epidemic, and the return to the normal sector seems unlikely in the short term. Even after the gradual lifting of containment measures, companies will continue to face the challenges posed by a probably slow recovery.

According to American Hotel and Lodging Association estimations, the pandemic could cause the equivalent of 305 million job losses [20], many of them in the tourism sector [20].

All over the world, airlines and tourism companies adapt their staff, and many companies have frozen all recruitment, risking compromising their ability to fill key positions once the crisis was overcome. Other companies have their part-time employees or collaborate with trade unions to develop strategies to avoid layoffs, which are often based on a reduction of working time [21].

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the global economy with severe consequences affecting all societies and individuals [22].

### 1.1 Problem Statement

In recent decades, tourism has become one of the most vital and dynamic sectors in the world and the wheel of tourism is going forward towards progress and development. Its importance as an engine of promotion of local economic development and job creation. Tourism is the main driver of jobs and growth, but COVID-19 has radically changed the situation. The pandemic, which now affects all continents at different stages, is strongly

impacting the global economy. Of all the sectors in crisis, tourism is one of the most affected.

Today, we have a clear picture of the Heavy COVID-19 loss balance on international tourism according to statistics provided by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) 28 Jul 20, which show, for the period up to May, a loss three times greater than that of the global economic crisis of 2009. As the situation continues to evolve, the United Nations Specialized Agency for Tourism provides the first analysis of the impact of the pandemic, both in terms of the number of tourists and in terms of revenue result of the travel restrictions around the world.

According to the latest edition of the Global Tourism Barometer, the total confinement imposed in response to the pandemic resulted in a 98% decline in the number of international tourists in May compared to 2019. In addition, the Barometer indicates a 56% year-over-year decrease in tourist arrivals over the January to May period. This causes a fall of 300 million tourists and a loss of USD 320 billion in international tourism revenue, more than triple the losses in international tourism revenue during the global economic crisis of 2009. The World Tourism Organization forecasts a 20-30% drop in international arrivals in 2020.

The KSA economy was severely affected by COVID-19, at the end of April 2020, revenue generated from airlines was expected to decline by US\$7.2bn, which was about 35% below their 2019 rates [18].

## 2. Material and Methods

In this study, we have combined both the literature search and the statistics relating to the impact of covid 19 on tourism. The literature review allowed us to review the main sources of knowledge on the topic. To do this, we reviewed articles and followed interviews and televised debates on the main issue of the pandemic at the national and international levels. Regarding statistic data, it should be noted that the available documentation is well supplied in terms of statistical data, especially at the national level. These are numerous and continuous, which allowed us to estimate the magnitude of the consequences on tourism activity. they have made it possible to grasp the extent of the adverse effects on domestic and international tourism and accommodation.

Analyses have been carried out on statistical data through a methodological approach combining a qualitative and quantitative approach, this allowed us to understand the magnitude of the economic effects on the tourism and travel sectors. While the first approach provided information on national and international tourism, the second approach provided statistical information on the economic impacts of tourism.

The analysis and interpretation of collected data enabled a diagnosis of the current state of the tourism sector following the COVID-19 epidemic and to identify its main impact on tourism in KSA. In addition, the results of the study provided information on the concerns mentioned above and also provided a better and fundamental understanding of how the pandemic impacted tourism in KSA.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Despite the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, Saudi Arabia is the second biggest tourist destination with over 16 million visiting in 2017 in the Middle East [23]. There is growth in the leisure tourism sector, although most tourism in Saudi Arabia still largely includes religious pilgrimages. The tourism sector is expected to be the white oil for Saudi Arabia by generating \$25 billion in 2019. [24] Potential tourist areas include Red Sea diving the Hijaz, Sarawat Mountains and several ancient ruins. Travel and tourism in Saudi Arabia added 9% to the Kingdom's total economy, which is worth \$65.2 billion, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), 2018 [25].

In Saudi Arabia, there are 15 domestic airports connecting the country regions and cities and 13 international airports served by various global.

#### 3.1. Impact of Covid-19 on domestic tourism

##### 3.1.1 Domestic pilgrims

Through two channels, the tourism demand is affected by Covid-19. First, visitors voluntarily refrain from traveling the reason include fear of catching the virus during their trips. The other is the travel government's restrictions to reduce community transmission of the virus.

Religious pilgrimages play a large role in Saudi Arabia's tourism [26]. Mecca receives over 500000 domestic pilgrims (coming from all regions of the kingdom) a year during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah in Hajj "Table 1" and "Figure 1" except for 2020 Mecca receives only 10000 domestic pilgrims "Table 1" and "Fig. 1". Domestic pilgrims number decreased by around 98% between 2019 and 2020.

This decrease in domestic pilgrims is caused by precautionary measures taken by the Saudi authorities especially physical distancing to minimize contamination by COVID-19. Mecca receives also around two million during the month of Ramadan to perform Umrah (Ministry of Hajj and Umrah). Mecca receives around four million for Umrah during the rest of the year [27].

Table 1. Domestic Pilgrims at 2014-2020. Source: [27].

Year	Domestic Pilgrims
2014	696,185
2015	567,876
2016	537,537
2017	600,108
2018	612,953
2019	634,379
2020	10000

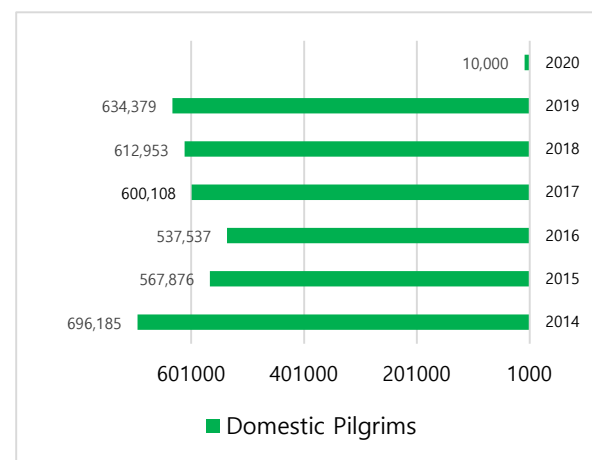


Fig. 1. Domestic Pilgrims at 2014-2020. Source: By researcher based on Table 1

According to the statistics of expenditure on domestic tourist trips by religious purposes "Table 2" and "Fig. 2", there is an increase in tourism revenue from one year to the next during the period 2014 to 2019 but we see a clear drop in this revenue between 2019 and 2020 that can be estimated around 44% which is equivalent to about 6,898 million Riyals.

Table 2. Expenditure on domestic tourist trips for religious purposes (Million Riyals).

years	Religious purposes
2014	10,236
2015	10,157
2016	11,716
2017	10,821
2018	9,960
2019	12,359
2020	5,461

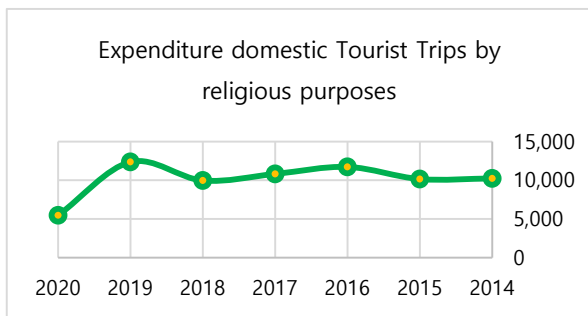


Fig. 2. Expenditure on domestic tourist trips for religious purposes (Million Riyals). Source: By researcher based on Table 2.

### 3.1.2 Domestic tourism

Domestic tourism expenditure in the Kingdom is not limited to Pilgrimage and Umrah but is intended for many purposes, “Table 3” and “Fig. 3” summarizes the expenditure on domestic tourism by purpose.

Table 3. Statistic of expenditure on domestic tourist trips by purpose of visit. Source: [28].

years	Holidays and Shopping	Visits To Relatives and Friends	Business and Conferences	Religious Purposes	Other Purposes	Total Expenditure
2014	13,391	12,122	3,031	10,236	4,302	43,082
2015	21,183	9,772	3,248	10,157	4,059	48,419
2016	24,318	14,017	1,886	11,716	3,492	55,429
2017	19,008	12,737	1,941	10,821	1,594	46,100
2018	19,046	15,084	2,248	9,960	1,784	48,122
2019	29,153	15,762	2,251	12,359	1,682	61,206
2020	23,188	11,068	2,147	5,461	1,483	43,347

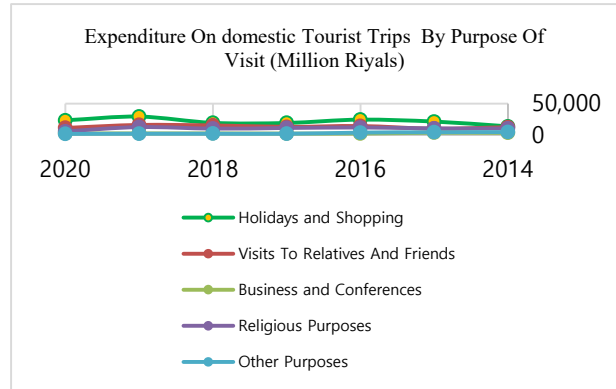


Fig. 3. Expenditure on domestic tourist trips by Purpose of visit (Million Riyals). Source: By researcher based on Table 3.

The domestic tourism industry recorded a positive tourist arrivals growth of 12.6% for 2019, registering a total of 47.8 million trips compared to 43.3 in the last year “Table 4” and “Fig. 4”. Domestic tourism is a quite different story, given the relatively softer travel restrictions and the better control of COVID transmission within KSA. According to the statistic of domestic tourism, domestic tourism demand decreased by 12% in 2020 registering a total of 42 million trips “Table 4” and “Figure 4” (about 88% of total domestic trips in 2019 (47.8 million trips)). Tourism revenue decreased by about 30% (43 billion Riyal around 70.4% of revenue in 2019 (61 billion Riyal)) “Table 4” and “Figure 5”. These numbers indicate that there is a reduction in 2020 for both visitor numbers and revenue.

Table 4. Statistic of domestic tourism. Source: [28].

Years	Expenditure* (Billion Riyals)	Domestic-Tourism-Trips (Million)
2014	43.0	37.1
2015	48.4	46.5
2016	55.4	45.0
2017	46.1	43.8
2018	48.1	43.3
2019	61.2	47.8
2020	43.3	42.1

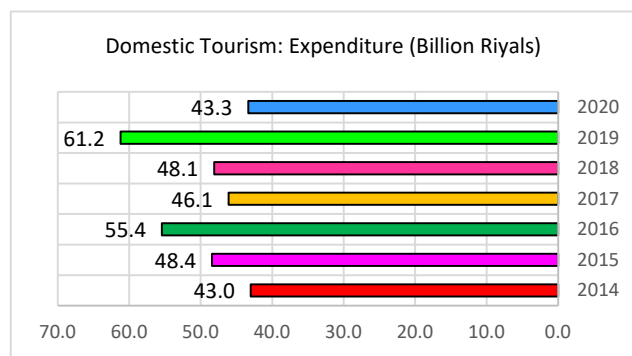


Fig. 4. Domestic Tourism: Trips (Million) 2014 to 2020. Source: by researcher based on Table 4.

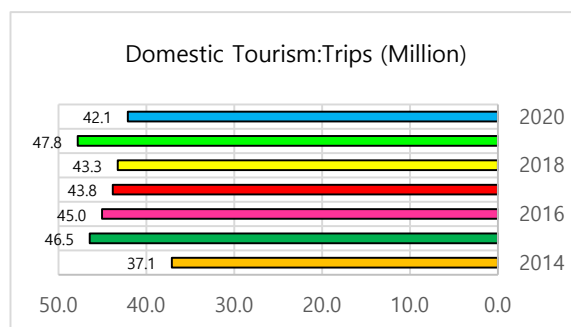


Fig. 5. Domestic Tourism: Expenditure (Billion Riyals) 2014 to 2020. Source: By researcher based on Table 4.

Many countries have opened their borders at the end of May or later, according to the Coronavirus situation but the strong recommendations of the governments to inhabitants is to spend their holidays in their own countries will reorient the common tourism route. Many people will stay in their own countries and others will not go on holidays.

From “Table 5” and “Fig. 6”, we conclude that domestic tourism in 2020 recorded, as a whole, a moderate decrease in the Eastern Boarders, Riyadh, Asir and Jazan. We also note the increased demand for domestic tourism in other regions as an alternative to international tourism which has been reduced by borders locked and travel restrictions measures. For Makkah and Al Madinah, we noticed a decrease of tourism trips as a consequence of strict application of precautionary.

Table 5. Number of domestic tourism trips by main destination. Source: [28].

years	Makkah	Al-Madinah	Al-Qassim	Eastern Boarders	Asir	Tabouk	Ha'il	Northern Boarders	Jazan	Najran	Al-Bahah	Al-Jawf
2014	13845	5927	942	4701	2826	1168	457	240	1006	271	1217	184
2015	16565	7361	947	5285	5092	1164	672	399	2076	432	1041	464
2016	16807	7879	734	3851	4988	1150	455	276	2352	527	1223	326
2017	16911	7236	908	3567	5322	1228	465	202	1885	600	1106	284
2018	15522	6552	1072	4093	4923	1246	791	263	2238	622	1235	393
2019	16017	7243	1445	4514	4943	1441	973	387	2352	564	1462	524
2020	43.3	42.1	2038	4284	4585	2043	1160	707	2053	612	1532	779

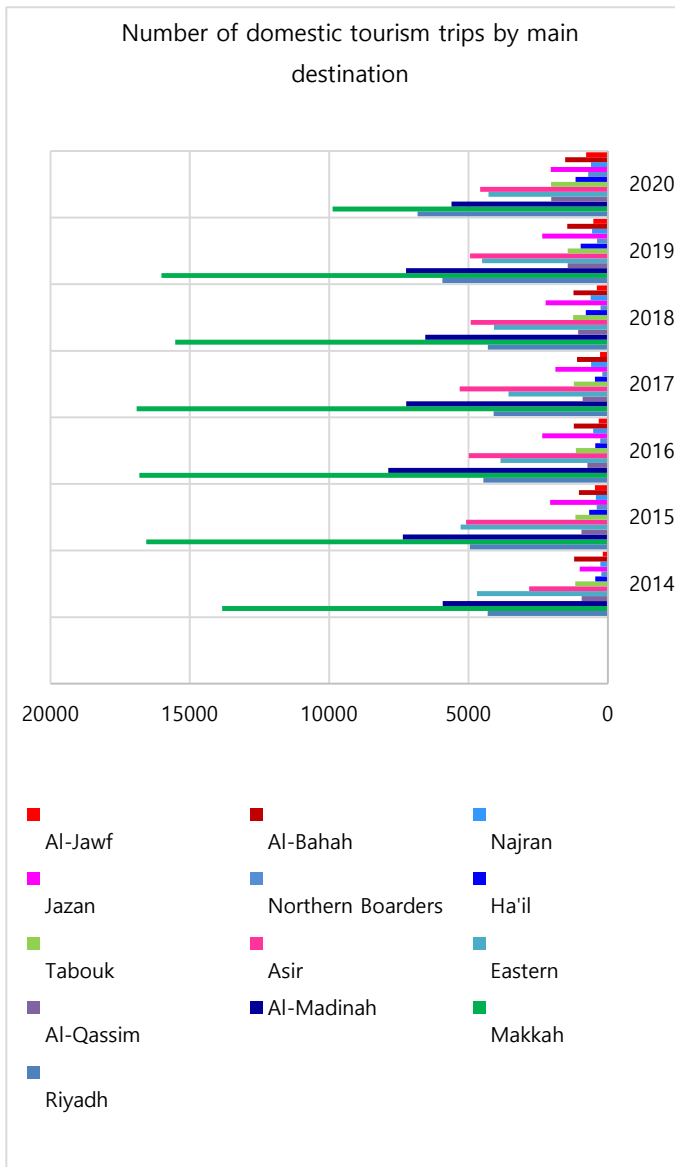


Fig. 6. The number of domestic tourism trips by the main destination. Source: By researcher based on Table 5

**3.1.3 Nights spent in Saudi Arabia by domestic tourist**

Domestic tourism activity measured by the number of total nights spent in Saudi Arabia increased from 2014 to 2020 by 11.88% and in 2019 this number has reached 42.1 million Nights. Between 2019 and 2020 the number of total nights spent in Saudi Arabia decreased by 12% (Table 6 and Fig. 7).

Table 6. Number of total nights spent in the Saudi Arabia by domestic tourists.

years	Domestic-Tourism-Nights (Million)
2014	37.1
2015	46.5
2016	45.0
2017	43.8
2018	43.3
2019	47.8
2020	42.1

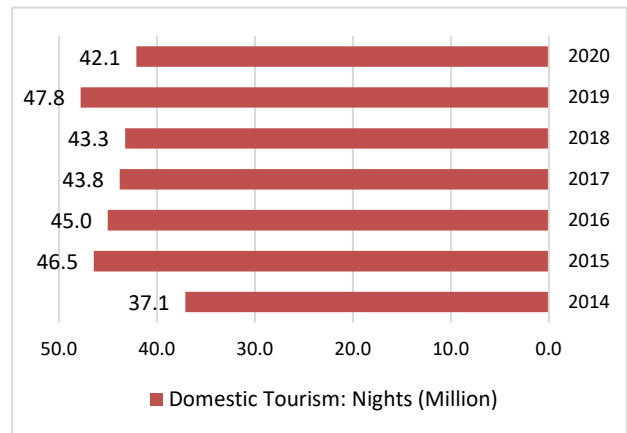


Fig. 7. Total nights spent in Saudi Arabia by domestic tourist source by the researcher based on Table 6.

**3.2 Impact of Covid-19 on international tourism demand**

**3.2.1 Foreign pilgrims**

Mecca is not only the destination of the saudian people, but it's the destination of all Muslims in the world. Every year Mecca receives over around 1.5 million foreign pilgrims a year during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah in Haji "Table 7". In 2020 precautionary measures taken Around

the world like measures of physical distancing and travel restrictions to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, these responses measures, combined with the loss of life and other impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly affected the performance of pilgrimages and Umrah.

“Table 7” and “Figure 8” show the evolution of foreign pilgrims from 2014 up to 2020 where we can notice a significant drop in foreign pilgrims (zero foreign pilgrims in 2020) which decreased by 100% in 2020 compared with last year (about 1,9 million foreign pilgrims).

Table 7. The number of Foreign Pilgrims from 2014 to 2020. Source [27].

years	Foreign Pilgrims
2014	1,389,053
2015	1,384,941
2016	1,325,372
2017	1,752,014
2018	1,758,722
2019	1,855,027
2020	0

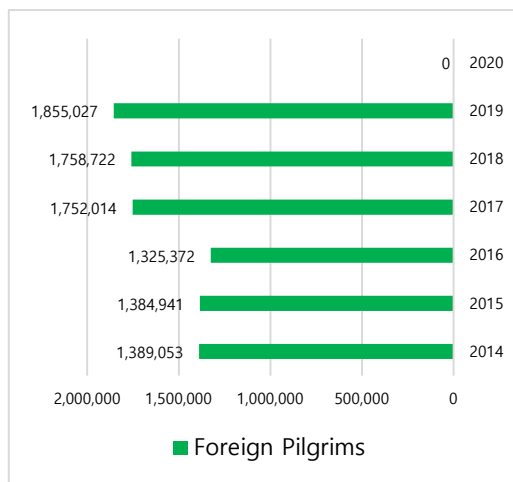


Fig. 8. The Number of Foreign Pilgrims from 2014 to 2020. Source: By researcher based on Table 7.

### 3.2.2 International tourism

Expenditure in the Kingdom is not limited to Pilgrimage and Umrah but is intended for many purposes, “Table 8” and “Fig. 9” summarizes the Expenditure inbound tourism by purpose.

Table 8. Statistic of expenditure on inbound tourist trips by purpose of visit Number of Foreign Source: [28].

years	Holidays and Shopping	Visits To Relative Friends	Business and Conferences	Religious Purposes	Other Purposes	Total Expenditure
2014	2,127	4,805	8,947	31,372	6,037	53,288
2015	4,954	10,622	10,091	47,766	9,067	82,500
2016	2,881	7,065	26,280	54,091	3,107	93,423
2017	1,703	5,687	18,382	70,909	1,097	97,778
2018	1,991	5,246	16,484	68,838	918	93,478
2019	5,049	7,773	20,421	68,077	2,034	103,354
2020	1,934	2,475	3,392	11,102	1,198	20,101

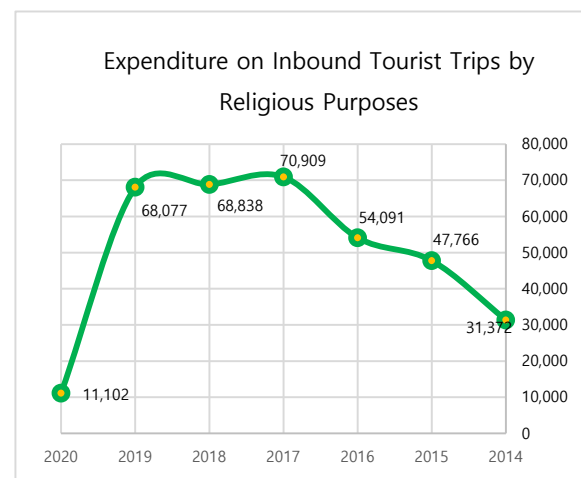
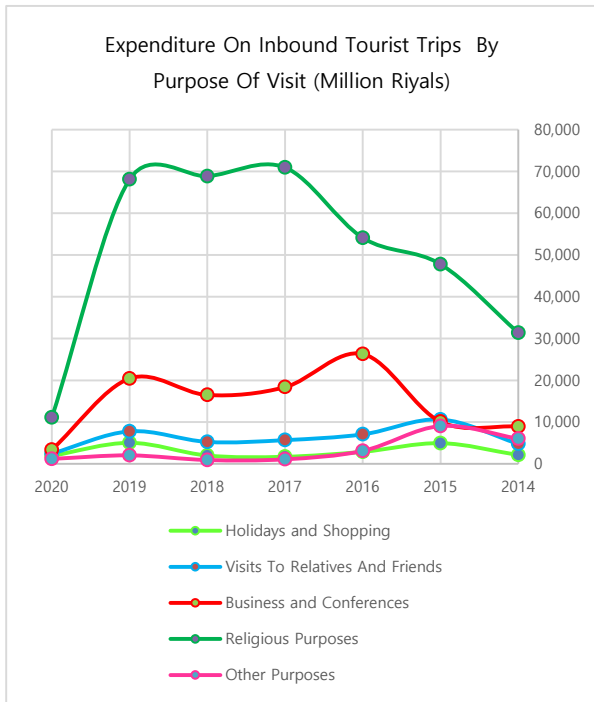


Fig. 9. Expenditure on inbound tourist trips for religious purposes. Source: By researcher based on Table 8

The COVID-19 Pandemic has heavily hit the international tourism demand, according to the statistic (2020) [28]. The inbound arrivals to KSA (the most important direction for musliman) in 2020 decreased by 94% compared with 2019 (17.5 million Trips in 2019 VS 4.1 million Trips in 2020) “Table 9” and “Fig. 10”. International tourism revenue decreased by 81% in 2020:



20.1 billion Riyal in 2020 VS 103.4 billion Riyal in 2019 “Table 9” and “Fig. 10”.

Fig. 10. Expenditure on inbound tourist trips by purpose of visit. Source: By researcher based on Table 8.

Table 9. Statistic of international tourism Source: [28].

years	Inbound-Tourism-Trips (Million)	Inbound-Tourism: Expenditure* (Billion Riyals)
2014	18.3	53.0
2015	18.0	82.5
2016	18.0	93.4
2017	16.1	97.8
2018	43.3	93.5
2019	47.8	103.4
2020	42.1	20.1

KSA recorded 4.1 million international arrivals in 2020, a decrease of 94% compared to the previous year due to Covid-19. Before the Covid-19 Pandemic, most international tourist arrivals were from South Asia, GCC, and the Middle East (excluding GCC countries). Arrivals from the United Kingdom, Ukraine and Germany, make up

nearly a quarter of all arrivals to the Middle East, while arrivals from Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and African countries account for over seven percent. “Table 10” and “Fig. 11”.

Table 10. The number of inbound tourism trips by the main destination. Source: [28].

years	G C C	Middle East (excluding GCC countries)	South Asia	Europe	Africa	East Asia and the Pacific	North and South America	Total
2014	6551	4593	3685	1148	848	1177	259	18261
2015	6699	3237	3616	1381	1139	1608	316	17994
2016	4722	3008	4336	1508	1518	1988	965	18044
2017	3781	2258	4723	1149	1487	2042	669	16109
2018	3611	1956	4224	1238	1407	1981	918	15334
2019	3734	2788	4493	1498	1502	2237	1273	17526
2020	1006	905	951	416	230	419	210	4138

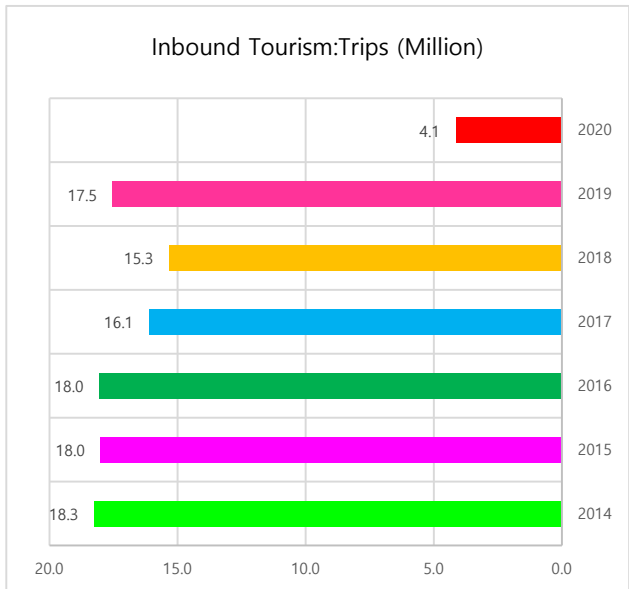


Fig. 10. Inbound Tourism: Trips (Million) 2014 to 2020 Source: By researcher based on Table 9.



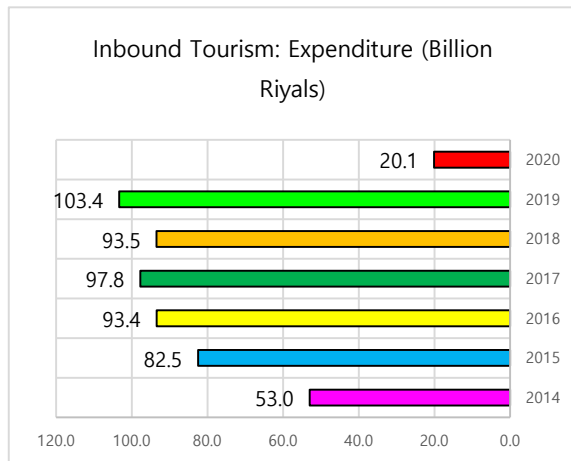


Fig. 11. Expenditure on inbound tourist trips by purpose of visit. Source : By researcher based on Table 9

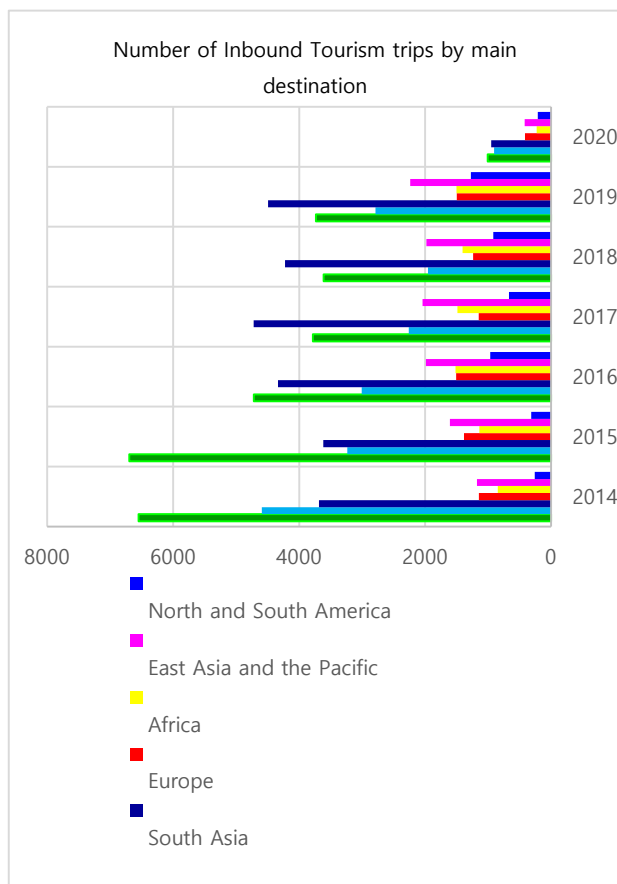


Fig. 12. The number of international tourism trips by the main destination. Source: By researcher based on Table 10

3.2.3 Nights spent in Saudi Arabia by international tourist

Hotels have been heavily impacted by lockdown measures, especially hotels in Makkah and Al-Madinah that depend on the Two Holy Mosques’ visitors. the number of total nights spent in Saudi Arabia increased from 2014 to 2019 by 53% and in 2019 this number has reached 189 million nights “Table 11” and “Fig. 13”. Between 2019 and 2020 the number of total nights spent in the Saudi Arabia decreased by 80% “Table 11” and “Figure 13”. Cancellations of bookings and drop-in occupancy of hotels will probably affect hotel revenue in 2020 compared to 2019.

In all of the above, the study shows the critical importance of the pandemic’s impact on the tourism, airline and accommodation sectors. Two major lessons emerged from the study. On the one hand, the results show that tourism has been hard hit by the pandemic. On the other hand, these results reveal the need for tourism operators to manage the crisis responsibly. In view of these considerations, this pandemic is an opportunity to rethink the forms of tourism that were already challenged by environmental vulnerability and conflicts of various kinds. In this context, it seems essential in the current context to adapt tourism towards greater resilience by exploring internal tourism and relying on the digitalization of the offer.

Table 11. Number of total nights spent in Saudi Arabia by international tourists Source: [28].

years	Inbound Tourism: Nights (Million)
2014	355
2015	193.1
2016	187.2
2017	171
2018	173.9
2019	189
2020	37.8

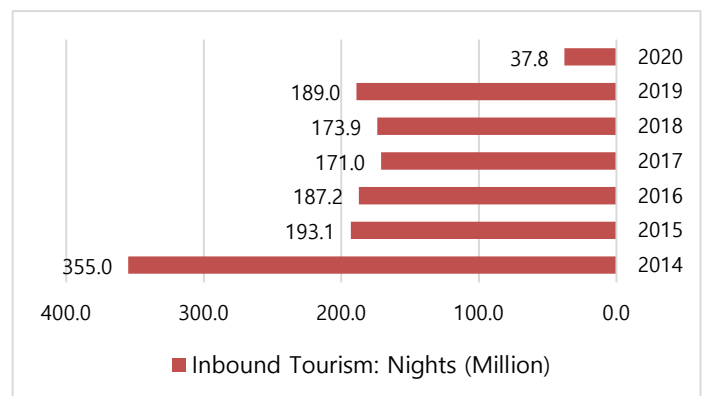


Fig. 13. Total nights spent in Saudi Arabia by tourism. Source: By researcher based on Table 11

#### 4. Conclusions

Health, the social and economic crisis caused by COVID-19 and the total confinement imposed in response to the pandemic have produced a powerful impact with a different magnitude that simultaneously affects the goods-producing and services, the mobility of people and the relationship between supply and demand for goods and services. At the critical time, many sectors have been a total cessation of their activities while others were more or less saved, but have been a significant reduction.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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