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Mass Tourism in the Spiritual Journey of Arbaeen Pilgrimage: Opportunity or Threat?

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Abstract

The spiritual journey of Arbaeen pilgrimage, as one of the oldest Shiite religious rituals in Iraq, hosts a vast number of pilgrims every year who endure hardships to reach the holy city of Karbala. The development of transportation networks, the promotion of social media, and the desire to visit spiritual and sacred places have led to a massive influx of tourists into Iraq, particularly fostering new spiritual trends and visits to specific religious practices. The spread of mass tourism and the gathering of millions of Shiites worldwide is considered a rare and unprecedented event in the Arbaeen pilgrimage. On the other hand, the widespread promotion of this religious event by various communities, especially Iran, is considered a strategic action. This paper examines mass tourism in the spiritual journey of Arbaeen from both an internal tourism management perspective and an external macro and strategic viewpoint. On one hand, the massive influx of pilgrims during the walk creates many threats and causes damage. Based on economic, environmental, sociological, spiritual, and religious analyses in tourism, threats can be identified that will expose both tourists and the local community to significant harm. On the other hand, a strategic view of Arbaeen as the gathering of millions of Shiites worldwide in a holy place is also important and considered a significant opportunity, one that perhaps has not been analyzed from a tourism perspective until now. Therefore, there is a need to align tourism management perspectives from an intracultural and strategic external viewpoint. Integrating macro-management approaches in both tourism and the broader strategic view of the Arbaeen event is one action that can turn all threats into opportunities.

Keywords: Arbaeen pilgrimage, spirituality, holy place, religious tourism.

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What effects will the promotion and advertising of a mass tourism approach in the spiritual journey of Arbaeen pilgrimage have from a tourism management perspective?

Extended Abstract

In the Arbaeen walk, all abstract spiritual concepts emerge and manifest. From the feeling of empathy and connection with other humans to connection and closeness to God, to social convergence, and understanding cultures, all are manifestations of spirituality in the modern era, which is indebted to tourism. Undoubtedly, the media is one of the most important mirrors reflecting this flood of people in the Arbaeen walk, but in any case, a solution must be found. This is because while a spiritual approach can be helpful, it can also be undesirable for the Arbaeen walk. The intertwining of materialism and modern spirituality with religious principles and beliefs, in any religion and belief, not just Islam, will be damaging. This is because a large part of spiritual themes in tourism are abstract and intangible, and there is no objective and physical evidence to define their boundaries, so problems may arise more than ever. Although a broad strategic approach cannot be ignored, as it is considered positive from this perspective and is very effective, both in presenting Shia religious identity and Iran's power in the region, and in promoting Iranian culture and the unity of Muslims with each other. However, the strategic approach can be integrated with a tourism management perspective, as the separate views of these two approaches may cause other problems in the future. Therefore, without considering this massive wave of spiritual inclinations and commercializing a journey that is inherently based on religious beliefs, focusing solely on quantitative statistics and promotional emphasis on the Shia community will lead to instability midway through and in the face of emerging problems. In this regard, the obligation and compulsion to aggressive and restrictive behavior with the aim of preventing tourists from attending these days will lead to negative effects of this aggressive behavior from another aspect. Especially in spiritual journeys that have a religious core, negative effects become more pronounced than ever.

The inclination towards spirituality and participation in spiritual events is on the rise. The Arbaeen walk is considered one of the largest religious mega-events in the world, which is noteworthy both from the perspective of spiritual and religious tourism and from a broad strategic approach aimed at demonstrating the power of Shiites in the Islamic world. Focusing solely on maximizing the number of attendees at this event will undoubtedly lead to problems later on, both from a religious perspective, tourism management, and harm to the guest and host communities. Furthermore, in this regard, broader goals will be sacrificed due to these problems and harms.

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