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The Strategic Role of Tourism in GCC-Africa Relations

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The Strategic Role of Tourism in GCC-Africa Relations

The GCC states are on a mission to diversify their economies from oil reliance. The development of tourism plays a significant role in this regard also with regard to Africa. In general, Gulf governments have shifted more focus to African economies in recent years and have nurtured the relations through soft, economic, political, and cultural power in part because African economies offer ample opportunities for agriculture, energy, and infrastructure investments from the GCC. At the same time, tourism is beginning to play an increasing role as well.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aims to attract over 70 million tourists to the kingdom annually by 2030 led by landmark projects like Al Ula and NEOM—the zero-carbon smart city on the Red Sea. Similarly, the UAE has positioned itself as a global tourism hub and aims to attract 40 million visitors by 2031 with cultural investments such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Museum. Qatar has leveraged its post-World Cup infrastructure to boost sports tourism and develop luxury coastal resorts. At the same time, Oman focuses on eco-tourism, promoting its natural landscapes and heritage sites through projects like the Oman Vision 2040 strategy.

In connection with reaching their tourism targets, Gulf states have increasingly turned their focus to Africa, facilitating tourism flows between the two regions. This growing engagement is evident in the surge of African tourists traveling to Dubai for leisure, Qatar for global events like the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and Saudi Arabia for the Hajj pilgrimage. In turn, Gulf investments in African tourism infrastructure and partnerships signal a deepening of these ties, positioning Africa as both a key market and a strategic partner in the region's expanding tourism landscape.

Religious tourism plays a crucial role in strengthening GCC-Africa relations, with the Hajj pilgrimage serving as a key cultural and economic link. Muslims constitute 40% of Africa's population, thus the annual journey to Mecca fosters deep historical and spiritual ties between the two regions. Recognizing its significance, Saudi Arabia has implemented initiatives like the Makkah Route Initiative, which streamlines visa processing and travel for African travellers coming to perform Hajj.¹ Countries such as Senegal and Nigeria have also contributed by subsidizing travel and accommodation costs, enabling more citizens to participate in the Islamic rite of passage. In 2024, over 207,000 Africans completed the pilgrimage, underscoring religious tourism's role in strengthening people-to-people connections and enhancing diplomatic, economic, and cultural cooperation between Africa and the Gulf.

In the last decade, tourism-related investments have soared ranging from transportation to hospitality and infrastructure. For instance, flights between Africa and the GCC have increased significantly, with Qatar Airways and Emirates Airlines offering more flights to various African cities. Qatar Airways, which currently travels to 32 African locations, invested 1.3 billion dollars in 2020 for a 49% stake in Rwanda Air and 60% for the Bugesera International Airport in Kigali. These investments stimulate tourism between Qatar and the continent as it aims to turn Rwanda into its pan-African hub.

¹ Arab News (2024) [First Group of Ivorian pilgrims benefiting from Makkah Route Initiative arrive in Holy City.](#)



Emirates Airlines, a private Emirati airline, offers voyages to 22 destinations in Africa and is expanding its breadth in the region. Building on the 23 airline partnerships with African companies, Emirates and Kenya Airlines announced in January 2023 a partnership further expanding its offerings to an additional 28 African destinations. Emirates Airlines is on a mission to expand its investments in the region and will offer over 161 weekly flights to Africa alone by the end of 2025. In addition, the airline offers eight weekly cargo flights between Africa and the UAE, facilitating trade among the regions and helping the UAE's other regional investments. For instance, the UAE has several mining and agricultural operations in various pockets of the continent, which benefit from the frequent flow of goods granted by Emirates SkyCargo.²

Saudi Arabia is also making considerable efforts on this front as, in 2025, its budget airline Flynas added three weekly flights between Uganda and Riyadh and Jeddah to Djibouti. In 2024, Al Eqtisadah announced that the Kingdom is establishing a new Riyadh-based airline which will primarily target African markets. Although the flight frequency, capacity, and destinations are to be determined, regulatory bodies in Saudi Arabia and the African Civil Aviation Commission have approved the initiative, as it will enhance tourism and facilitate economic and cultural exchanges between the regions.³ As Saudi Arabia aims to launch significant investments in Africa in the coming years, aviation and tourism are pertinent, as demonstrated by the UAE – Africa's largest investor as of 2024.

Investments in tourism across Africa highlight the expanding regional ties between the Gulf and the continent. Dubai Investments recently announced the establishment of Dubai Investment Park Angola, a mixed-use development integrating residential, industrial, commercial, and recreational spaces. Leveraging a three-kilometer coastline in the Dande Municipality, the project aims to become a major tourist hub while also supporting broader economic growth through industrial and residential zones.⁴ This initiative reflects a multifaceted approach to tourism, blending business opportunities with leisure development. Expanding on this momentum, Jumeirah, a subsidiary of Dubai Holding owned by the Al Maktoum family, has partnered with South Africa's Thanda Group to enhance its hospitality presence in Africa. Their collaboration currently includes a luxury island retreat off Tanzania's coast and a Safari reserve in South Africa, further reinforcing the Gulf's commitment to Africa's tourism industry.⁵

In January 2025, the UAE and Kenya signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, targeting key sectors such as retail, agriculture, healthcare, and tourism. A cornerstone of this agreement is the expansion of the Standard Gauge Railway, which links Nairobi, Kenya's capital, to Mombasa, a major coastal city and tourist hotspot known for its safari experiences.⁶ The railway is set to extend further, connecting Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania, fostering seamless regional tourism. Meanwhile, Gulf investments in hospitality, aviation, and ground transportation are

² Emirates (2024) [Emirates ramps up operations in Africa to serve growing demand, Emirates ramps up operations in Africa.](#)

³ Middle East Monitor (2024) [Saudi Arabia to launch new airline targeting African market.](#)

⁴ Dubai Investments (2024) [Dubai Investments Announces First Flagship Mixed-Use Development in Africa, Dubai Investments Park Angola.](#)

⁵ Kumar, P. (2024) [Jumeirah enters Africa to expand Hotel portfolio, AGBI.](#)

⁶ Uppal, D.M. and R. (2025) [Kenya turns to the UAE for railway funds after China cut financing, ZAWYA.](#)



driving both outbound GCC tourism to Africa and inter-African travel. By 2025, Africa is expected to account for approximately 3% of outbound GCC travelers, a number poised to grow with enhanced connectivity. Additionally, the surge in new flight routes and aviation investments has positioned Gulf states as key transit hubs, expanding travel options for African passengers en route to Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

While the effort to promote tourism ties continues, obstacles need to be tackled to allow these ties to flourish further. For one, the visa process for African passport holders en route to Gulf states needs to be revisited. Currently, South Africa and Seychelles are among the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have the luxury of acquiring a visa on arrival in Gulf states. Unlike British, American, European, and some Asian passport holders, Africans are ineligible for visas on arrival, which stymies the flow of tourism. Similarly, several African nations do not offer visas on arrival for Gulf states; overcoming these challenges will provide significant benefits for both regions in terms of cultural and economic exchanges.

Facilitating visas on arrival will add to Gulf soft power as they shore up investments in various African industries. This soft power will be crucial in acing the competition for access from China, Russia, and Turkey. Furthermore, a steady stream of tourists will lead to greater job creation and support local economies; however, there are security-related challenges. The Sahel and the Horn of Africa are incubators for extremists who can seep through the porous borders of neighbouring countries. Therefore, there would need to be increased security cooperation between the GCC and Africa to abate the threat of terrorists exploiting looser visa regulations.

There are also security considerations at play. While the coast of Saudi Arabia serves as a vital instrument to Saudi oil production and trade, it is an area of instability emanating from extremism in the Horn of Africa. For these reasons, maritime security and stability in the region is pinnacle to the Kingdom's agenda and contribute to the Gulf state's increasing interest in African countries. Recognizing the link between security and tourism, Saudi Arabia has taken proactive measures, including the establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), a 43-member alliance that facilitates counterterrorism training and bilateral security cooperation.

Additionally, the Kingdom operates a military base in Djibouti and helped form the Council of Arab and African States along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to safeguard regional interests. As tourism between the Gulf and Africa expands, ensuring peace and stability remains crucial, with Gulf states making significant security-related investments to protect travelers, secure waterways, and facilitate safe movement between the regions.

In conclusion, the Gulf states are actively diversifying their economies and fostering closer ties with Africa through tourism, aviation, and investments in infrastructure and hospitality. These initiatives have bolstered economic and cultural exchanges while enhancing Africa's tourism potential. However, challenges such as restrictive visa policies and regional security concerns must be addressed to unlock the full potential of these partnerships. By tackling these obstacles, both regions stand to benefit from stronger economic ties, job creation, and enhanced soft power, further solidifying the Gulf's influence in Africa amidst growing global competition.

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