# What Made You Go?: Understanding Tourist Motivations In Visiting Current And Former Conflict Zones With A Focus On Iraq

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**Objectives** | Locations recovering from conflict encounter difficulty rebuilding their tourism sectors. Factors include infrastructure devastation and persistent perception of danger long after an actual conflict has ended, creating hesitancy among potential visitors. This work seeks to answer the following research questions: For those who do venture into these locations soon after war or in the midst of it, what are their characteristics and motivations? Would understanding these early travellers allow recovering locations from targeting them through early marketing to speed tourism sector recovery and overall economic rebuilding, perhaps leading to a faster shift in outside perceptions of whether a location remains dangerous after a war has ended?

Tourism's importance to the global economy is clear. The tourism industry is one of the world's largest economic sectors. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), until the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the sector represented "1 in 4 of all new jobs created in the world, 10.3% of all jobs (333 million), and 10.3% of global GDP (USD 9.6 trillion)" (2022).

For many countries recovering from war and conflict, the tourism industry may serve a role to kick start the economy, relinking a nation and its people to the outside world. While a question for future work, the researchers also hypothesize that rebuilding the tourism sector may both stabilize a weak economy as well as help in the transition to democratic and socially responsible governance in the wake of conflict.

**Methodology** | The research takes a mixed methods approach with a primary emphasis on qualitative analysis. The researchers will conduct approximately 10 qualitative interviews with recent travellers to areas considered current or recent former conflict zones, with a current phase focused on Iraq. Questions would get at motivations, before and after visit perceptions of a location, media research, family and friend influences, ethnic and family ties to regions of war along with how well travelled one might have been before such visits. In addition, to determine the influence of these factors, the researcher will collect data on characteristics such as Risk-Taking Behaviour and Resilience using already available scales.

In addition, to determine the influence of other factors, researchers are collecting data on characteristics such as Risk-Taking Behaviour using the General Risk Propensity Scale – GriPS (Zhang et al, 2018). The project is currently focused primarily on visits to Iraq, both the southern Arab section where the recent war was concentrated and the northern Kurdish Autonomous Region, which has developed a nascent tourism sector. Subjects are being recruited from companies which have brought tourists to conflict zones, as well as from networks of independent travellers. The interviews will be coded to examine patterns which might emerge in the subject responses. The researchers will also test the robustness of traditional analysis of qualitative data by a comparative analysis using both traditional and data analysis software such as NVivo. The research is in its preliminary stages, including the early interviews with travellers.

A model for aspects of the planned qualitative methodology is presented by Monterrubio and Barrios (2016) in their work on tourist motivations among lesbian travellers in Mexico, "Lesbians as Tourists: A Qualitative Study of Tourist Motivations in Mexico." The researchers used their social networks and snowball samples to gather their interviewees for a subject that, like the motivations of travellers to conflict zones, is also not well understood and for which there is little in the way of existing research. Interviewees for this project on tourist motivations will be gathered via target boutique travel companies and other organizations which have brought travellers into current and former conflict zones which have begun to develop emerging, though limited, tourism sectors. Such companies include Kurdistan Adventures, run by Australian Shannon Skerritt, and The Other Iraq Tours, started by Retired U.S. Army Colonel Harry Schute, or Wild Frontiers, which specialized in Afghanistan until the 2021 Taliban takeover, as well as Spiekermann Tours. Some of these company owners are direct contacts of the researcher in his capacity as a journalist. Other interviewees will be gathered via social media, including Facebook groups aimed at travellers to conflict zones.

The interviews have a duration in the range of approximately one hour, with additional time for completing Risk and Resilience surveys. The goal is to transcribe the interviews and code the themes that emerge from them, with a Grounded Theory approach. Later research might examine specific themes that emerge in greater detail. The interviews will be coded to examine patterns which might emerge in the subject responses. The researcher will also test the robustness of traditional analysis of qualitative data by a comparative analysis using both traditional and data analysis software such as NVivo.

Importantly, defining what is a conflict zone or former conflict zones will be key to deciding which visitors to include within surveys. In its current phase, the project is focused primarily on visits to Iraq, both the southern Arab section where the recent war was concentrated and the northern Kurdish Autonomous Region, which is beginning to develop a tourism sector. Visitors to Afghanistan might also be considered. Both countries are sites where the United States and other countries have been involved in occupation and conflict. Thus, these locations are generally considered recent conflict zones by the lay population (Sanger & Burns, 2003; Zucchino, 2021).

**Main Results and Contributions** | Despite the constant appearance of wars across the globe, the war in Ukraine only the most recent example, there is little research on how locations recovering from conflict can rebuild their tourism economies. Locations recovering from conflict encounter difficulty rebuilding their tourism sectors. Factors include infrastructure devastation and persistent perception of danger long after an actual conflict has ended, creating a hesitancy among potential visitors. This work seeks to answer the following research questions: For those who do venture into these locations soon after war or in the midst of it, what are their characteristics and motivations? Would understanding these early travellers allow recovering locations to target them through early marketing to speed tourism sector recovery and overall economic rebuilding, perhaps leading to a faster shift in outside perceptions of whether a location remains dangerous after a war has ended? As we are in preliminary stages, we expect to have a better understanding by the time of the conference.

**Limitations** | We are in preliminary stages, with five interviews conducted with travellers to Iraq, recruited from a boutique travel agency. So far, these travellers tend to skew older and wealthier. We will be posting for recruitment on social media and expect that those interviewees might be more diverse.

**Conclusions** | We are in preliminary stages, and expect to have more detailed preliminary qualitative analysis and additional interviews with people who have visited Iraq, recruited via social media, by the time of the conference.

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