3 Developing Event Tourism in Saudi Arabia: Opportunities and Challenges

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Background of the Saudi Tourism Industry

Saudi Arabia is in the heart of the Islamic world, hosting Hajj, a mega religious annual event (Haq, 2013). Recently the Saudi government has sought to capitalize on this expertise by developing its events sector. The tourism industry in general and event tourism in particular represent an ideal opportunity to diversify the economy and create jobs. The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTNH) collaborates with other Saudi National Government Organizations (GOs) to develop the tourism industry including its events sector. This chapter provides an overview of the Saudi event tourism sector including the existing opportunities, highlights the challenges in developing the sector, and the government initiatives to overcome challenges.

Development of event tourism sector

The event sector in Saudi Arabia began in 1985 with the Aljanadriyah Festival in Riyadh organized by the Ministry of the National Guard. Other early events included the two annual Eid celebrations organized by the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs in all Saudi provinces. The Supreme Commission for Tourism (SCT) was established in 2000 as the primary government tourism organisation to legislate, organize, manage the tourism industry in the Kingdom (Winckler, 2007). Prior to its establishment, the Saudi tourism industry had no supervision authority or development plan. The hotel sector was managed by the Ministry of Commerce and had less than 100,000 rooms with low occupancy rates except for the two holy cities, Makkah and Madinah. By 2015, SCT had acquired responsibility for archaeological sites and tangible and intangible heritage, and in that year changed its name to become the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTNH). The SCTNH has since led coordinated GOs to develop three types of events – festivals and cultural celebrations, sporting and business events (Getz, 2008) – creating an events portfolio (Getz, 2013). Prior

to 2013, business and sport events received less attention from GOs in comparison to festivals and cultural celebrations.

Food festivals

Food festivals have shown significant growth in terms of number of events and number of visitors. The Aljouf Olive Festival, which begun in 2008, was one of the first food festivals organized by the SCTNH. This festival achieved revenue of about US\$10 million by 2011 (O'Toole, 2012). After creating new events, SCTNH gives control to local event organizers but continues to provide logistical support. The success of the Aljouf Olive Festival motivated local event organizers to plan for new events, resulting in a move from traditional top-down planning to bottom-up planning (Getz, 2013) and the creation of more than 60 food festivals in 12 Saudi provinces (see Table 3.1). Saudi event organizers took advantage of the different landscape, local cuisines and cultures around the Kingdom (Almubarak, 2015, email, 20 July; Alsaif, 2015, email, 20 July). For example, event organizers in six Saudi provinces; Makkah, Asir, Jazan, Aljouf, Albaha and Najran, took advantage of the beekeeping tradition and the use of honey as a primary ingredient in traditional dishes and local diets to organize seven annual honey festivals (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Saudi food and gastronomy events around the Kingdom

<i>No. Event</i>	<i>No. Event</i>
Makkah Province (12–1 events)	Asir Province (4 events)
1 Mango festival in Alqunfudhat	36 Honey festival in Rijal Almaa
2 Honey festival in Alandiyat province	37 Sifr Bisha festival (dates)
3 Saudi food, hotels & hospitality exhibition	38 Grapes festival in Balgaran
4 Almamool Almakka Marker	39 Wheat festival in Balasmeer
5 Figs and berries festival in Taif	Eastern Province (4 events)
6 Almonds festival in Taif	40 Alahsa festival of palm and dates
7 Taif rose festival	41 Marketing Alahsa manufacturer dates festival
8 Honey festival in Taif	42 Palm trees and dates festival in Aljubail
9 Taif pomegranate festival	43 Alaseda festival (local dish)
10 Grape festival in Taif	Jazan Province (4 events)
11 Global food festival in Taif	44 Athareed festival (fish)
12 Fruit festival*	45 Mango and tropical fruits festival
Riyadh Province (11–1 events)	46 Honey festival
13 Jania festival for palm trees & dates in Riyadh	47 Coffee beans festival

14	Alkharj date festival	Aljouf Province (3 events)
15	Watermelon festival in Riyadh	48 Olive festival in Aljouf
16	Watermelon festival in Wadi Aldawasir	49 Aljouf dates festival
17	Watermelon festival in Sajer	50 Ghee and honey festival
18	Dairy festival in Alkharj	Albaha Province (3 events)
19	Global cuisine festival	51 International honey festival
20	Taste festival in Riyadh	52 Pomegranate festival
21	Singaporean food festival in Riyadh	53 Banana and Kadi festival
22	Int. coffee & chocolate exhibition	Najran Province (2 events)
23	Almajma'a date festival*	54 Najran national festival for citrus & agriculture investment
Alqassim Province (12-3 events)		55 Bees and beekeepers festival
24	Buraidah date festival	Almadinah Province (4-3 events)
25	Dnizah date festival	56 Saudi taste festival
26	Riyadh Alkhabra date festival	57 Alais dates festival*
27	Alkairia date festival	58 Citrus festival in Alota*
28	Kulajjah festival	59 Almadinah Almonorah dates & food industries festival*
29	Qoot festival for packed dates in Alqassim	Tabouk Province (1 event)
30	Grapes festival in Alqassim	60 Fruit and roses festival
31	Ghee & sheep festival	Hail Province (2-2 event)
32	Exhibition of dates and food Alqassim	61 Dates and grapes festival*
33	Algal date festival*	52 Hail tourism and agriculture festival*
34	Shagra date festival*	Northern Borders Province (0 event)
35	Matnab date festival*	

(*): Events no longer existing.

Heritage events

Saudi Arabia is a unique tourism destination as it hosts a diversity of cultures. This diversity is due to the rich culture of different tribes living in the Arabian Peninsula, influenced by cultures of millions of pilgrims performing Hajj every year, and the ancient civilisations surrounding the Kingdom. Each of the 13 provinces has its own culture, and each region share folklore, dances and food cuisine. In recognition of this, Former King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz organized the Aljanadriyah National Festival for Heritage and Culture, the most famous and longest lasting heritage event in the GCC region and only one in the Kingdom for over 20 years (1985-2005). Today, there are

about 40 heritage festivals around the Kingdom with two standing out due to their size, location, symbolism and government investment (see [Table 3.2](#)).

Table 3.2 Saudi heritage events and seasonal celebrations

Heritage Festivals

AlJanadriyah festival	Ummluj sea heritage festival	Radhwa desert festival	Rijal Alma heritage Village tourism festival	King Abdulaziz Award for camels beauty contest
Historic Jeddah festival	Taima heritage festival	Turaif falconry festival	Abha Carnival	Counties nights (festival)
Souk Okaz	Heritage sports festival	National built heritage forum	Khail O Hail festival	Al-Huridah Festival
This is our Ramadan festival	Hajr market festival	Souk Hajr	Gulf days festival	East Coast festival
Aldokhala festival	We all love our heritage festival	Almusawkaif traditional festival	Sedu festival	Ummluj sea heritage festival
Oshaigar folk village festival	Alola heritage festival	Heglina Winasa	National Arabian horse show	This is our Eid festival
Alghat folk village festival	Hail Int. desert festival	Dhuba heritage festival	Aba Saud heritage festival	Alhara Almakaya festival
Jazan Carnival	Al-sodah folk village festival	Alghada festival	Alhsa countryside festival	

Summer Festivals

Arar summer festival	Buraidah summer festival	Bani Malik summer festival	Alrass spring festival	Alriyadh municipality summer festival
Rafha summer festival	Onizah summer festival	Spring festival in Dumat Aljandal	Ahed Ra'idah summer festival	Taif summer festival
Hail summer festival	Almathnah summer festival	Abha yajmana festival	Diving summer festival	
Albada'a summer festival	Taibah summer festival	King Khalid University summer festival	Eastern summer festival	
Yunbu summer festival	Najran summer festival	Tadoul summer festival	Jazan summer festival	

<i>Spring Festivals</i>				<i>Winter Festivals</i>
Alzulfi spring festival	Abha spring	Alni'ayriah spring festival	Buraidah spring festival	Asir Winter festival
Riyadh spring festival	Baheeta spring festival	Tourism spring forum	Bishah tourism spring festival	Jazan winter festival
Qulwa spring festival	Mikhwat spring festival	Tabouk spring festival	Najran spring festival	Mahayel winter festival

The historic Jeddah Festival and Souk Okaz, heritage festivals staged in Makkah province, stand out from other heritage festivals. Before the birth of Islam, Arabs used to practice Hajj in Makkah as part of their Abrahamic religious beliefs. On their trip to Makkah, Arabs used to stop for a month at a place south of Makkah called Souk Okaz, which was the most famous Arab market of the time. In 2007, the governor of Makkah province, HRH Prince Khalid Alfaisal with the support of the SCTNH revived this market (Souk Okaz) to become a signature heritage event in Saudi Arabia. Between 2007 and 2016, the Saudi government invested heavily to transform the location of this market from empty land in the middle of the desert to a small festival village suitable to host a major event. In 2015 261,055 visitors travelled to Souk Okaz, and 47% were tourists (MAS, 2015c). Within the National Transformation Program announced by the Saudi government recently (NTP, 2016), Souk Okaz was allocated US\$355 million to further develop the site infrastructure and a new attraction *The Avenue of the Future* (SCTNH, 2016a).

Jeddah Historic Festival, a second major heritage event created in 2013, took advantage of world heritage listing of the city centre of Jeddah by the UNESCO. Several GOs collaborated to transform Jeddah city centre from a deserted neighbourhood with dilapidated historical buildings and poor infrastructure to a place suitable to host a major event. The new event attracted about 3 million visitors over the two years (2014–2015), and was awarded the title of the best heritage festival in the Kingdom in 2014 (MAS, 2015b).

Seasonal celebrations

Seasonal celebrations are another type of festival that grown significantly in the last decade. Prior to 2000, the only celebrations in the Kingdom were Eid Alfitr and Eid Aladha organized by the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MMRA). They are associated with Ramadan and Hajj, receptively. The major common element in these two events are fireworks in capital cities; however, recently plays and stand-up comedies have been included. After a long debate between Saudi authorities, the MMRA has also started celebrating the

Kingdom's unification day in September. While celebrations take place in the capital city of each province, major events at Riyadh and Eastern Provinces attracted 79,628 visitors in 2014 with 17% of them tourists coming from other provinces (MAS, 2014).

As the temperature around the Kingdom can reach 50° C during summer, most outbound tourism takes place during the summer school break. To avoid economic leakage, many summer festivals are being organized in the southwest mountain region of the Kingdom, where the temperatures are acceptable. Most of these events (shown in Table 3.2) are named after the host city with no special themes that differentiate them. Recently, SCTNH requested the Ministry of Education to introduce a two-week break during the first and second semesters to motivate families with children at school and university levels to travel in all four seasons. More than 13 seasonal festivals in spring and winter seasons are being organized around the Kingdom (see Table 3.2).

Finally, to put all festivals and cultural celebrations into perspectives, the 35 largest events attracted more than 12 million visitors in 2012 (see Table 3.3) (MAS, 2012b). In 2013, HRH Prince Sultan bin Salman, General Secretary of the SCTNH, announced that Saudi event tourism has increased from five events in 2004 to more than 450 events worth US\$5 billion and directly responsible for more than 50,000 jobs (O'Toole, 2013). The Historical Jeddah Festival alone managed to attract 3 million visitors over two years (SCTNH, 2015b). Despite this rapid growth, many opportunities for other types of event tourism remain including shopping festivals, fashion festivals, film festivals and business events (Alsaif, 2015, email, 20 July).

Table 3.3 Visitor's numbers for Saudi Event Tourism in 2012

<i>Event</i>	<i>Visitor's numbers</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Visitor's numbers</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Visitor's numbers</i>
Riyadh shopping Festival	2,255,269	Hail Rally Festival	251,432	Alkulaija Festival	62,093
Abha Gathers us Festival	2,038,288	Mango Festival Jazan	194,751	Aljouf Olive Festival	56,389
Jeddah Summer Festival	1,677,556	Buraidah Spring Festival	117,989	Hareed Festival Farasan	33,765
Taif Summer Festival	1,056,930	Alghada Festival	110,113	Al-Hassa Countryside Festival	21,340
Eastern Summer Festival	913,446	Desert Festival in Hail	103,551	Beautiful Umuluj Festival	20,490

Summer Aramco Jeddah	540,072	Buraidah Summer Festival	103,541	Eastern Architectural Heritage	18,591
Baha Summer Festival	515,591	Unayza Summer Festival	101,447	Baha Spring Festival	16,420
Alnassa for shopping & Entertainment	411,079	Namas Summer Festival	95,249	Alwan Saudi	9747
Hail Summer Festival	379,302	Aljouf Helwa Festival	93,400	Aljouf Spring Festival in Boumet Aljandal	9000
Taiba Summer Festival	290,544	Jazan Winter Festival	85,781	Tabuk Horse Cardamom Festival	5950
Flower Festival Taif	256,228	Najran Summer Festival	65,384	Alhuhaitah Spring Festival	1951
Souk Olay	236,088	Summer Aramco, Riyadh	56,131	<i>Total number of visitors</i>	<i>12,215,498</i>

Sources: Adapted from (MA5, 2012b).

Sport and business events

In comparison to festival and cultural celebrations, sport and business events have received less attention and only a limited number of sport and business events have been organized. The first major sporting event (Hail International Rally) begun in 2006. Recently, two new events have been launched; Jeddah Rally (2013) and Saudi Star Drift Championship (2014). Other minor events include the Riyadh Principality Champion for Driving Skills and a Sailing Boat Event in Jazan (SaudiTourism, 2015).

Tourism-related business events established prior to 2013 include the Travel and Tourism Investment Forum 2009 and Forum of Colours in 2012. Other well-recognized events include the Jeddah and Riyadh Economic Forums organized by the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the Riyadh and Jeddah International Book Fairs organized by the Ministry of Cultural and Media. Business events are more difficult to stage due to difficulties in getting visas for international speakers, exhibitors and visitors, global and regional competitions and limited event venues (Abu Rukba, 2015, workshop, 15 July; Alawadi, 2015, workshop, 15 July). The following sections discuss these challenges and government initiatives to overcome them.

Challenges in Developing Event Tourism

Saudi Arabia is still developing its tourism and events infrastructure and faces a number of issues identified and discussed below.

Limited entry options for tourists

Currently, there are only three visa options to enter the Kingdom; for Hajj and Umrah purposes, to conduct business and to visit archaeological sites visitors under government supervision. Saudi Arabia primarily targets local residents and citizens from the Gulf Cooperation Council States (GCC) who require no tourist visa. There is no official government statement explaining the reasons for restricting non-GCC citizen visits. One possible reason is the limited transportation, accommodation and services needed to serve international tourists. Another is that the Saudi culture is conservative and international tourists, unfamiliar with Islamic culture, could trigger negative behaviour by local communities. Similarly, participants in business events including speakers in conferences and forums face a long government process to secure visas to enter the Kingdom. Exhibitors participating in international exhibitions face similar challenges in obtaining customs approvals to enter the Kingdom. Due to this issue, the TTCR gives the 'visa requirements' indicator a value of zero out of 100, ranking Saudi Arabia on 140th out of 141 tourism destinations on this indicator (TTCR, 2015).

Global and regional competition

There appears to be a significant unmet demand for events in Saudi Arabia. More than 20 million Saudi tourists leave the Kingdom every year for tourism purposes and spend about \$17 billion (MAS, 2012b). In the Arab world, the top tourism destinations for Saudi tourists with portfolios are Bahrain, United Arab of Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Jordan and Egypt. Dubai city in UAE (1–2 hours away by air from most Saudi cities) attracts tourists with annual festivals and celebrations including the Dubai International Shopping Festival, the two Eid celebrations and the New Year Celebration. Music festivals and concerts, such as Hala Febraier Festival in Kuwait and Qatar Spring Festival, depend heavily on Saudi singers (Alzahrani, 2003) to attract thousands of Saudi tourists (Alquds, 2015). It is a challenge for Saudi event organizers of such events as the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas (PCIRIF), which is a government organisation that advises the king on religious matters, deprives organizing music festivals, support them in any way and attending them (Al Al-Shaykh, Abu Zayd, Ibn Ghudayyan, & Al-Fawzan, 1999).

In relation to business events, Dubai with its excellent facilities attracts academics, professionals, government officials and other

tourist groups. Dubai's hosts major regional exhibitions such as the Dubai City Scape and GITEX Technology Week. According to the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) (2015), UAE has targeted business tourists by organizing Expo 2020, constructing Louvre and Guggenheim Museums, developing world-class air transport infrastructure (ranked 3rd globally), effective branding campaigns for its business environment (ranked 1st globally) and liberalization of its visa system (ranked 30th globally). These advantages allow UAE to be ranked 24th on the TTCR index, ahead of Qatar (43rd) and Saudi Arabia (64th) (TTCR, 2015). Saudi fans also travel to support their national football teams and local football clubs at regional level (GCC competitions), continental level (Arab, Islamic and Asian competitions) and global level (FIFA World Cup) and to attend Champions League matches. There is a significant gap in competitiveness between UAE and Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Limited number and size of event venues

Limitations in the number and size of event venues in Saudi Arabia also restrict the number of events offered. To host conferences with exhibitions and other side events, event organizers have few suitable options in Riyadh and only one option in Jeddah (Abu Rukba, 2015, workshop, 15 July; Alawadi, 2015, workshop, 15 July). Abu Rukba (2015, workshop, 15 July) describes Jeddah Hilton Hotel as the best and only option to host conferences and forums with large and multiple side events in Jeddah. This hotel offers a theatre room (suitable for conference/forum sessions), two hall areas (suitable for exhibitions) and 10 medium and small rooms (suitable for workshops, press rooms, meeting rooms and one-on-one meeting rooms) (Abu Rukba, 2015, workshop, 15 July). Organizing a conference/forum at a five-star hotel is also a preferable option for organizers as it helps to reduce the cost for driving delegates between their accommodation and the event location (Alawadi, 2015, workshop, 15 July). Other venues around the Kingdom, such as exhibition centres and halls within five-star hotels, are used for small-scale business events.

About 80% of exhibitions are organized in Riyadh (50%) and Jeddah (30%) (SEMA, 2015). According to a recent study conducted by the Saudi Exhibition and Conventions Bureau, Riyadh city is not competitive with major international cities in terms of its capability to host business events (see [Table 3.4](#)). The Riyadh International Centre for Exhibitions and Conferences is small compared to those in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and is not connected to hotels and shopping malls. Riyadh Centre management attracted and organized about one-third the number of events in Abu Dhabi and Dubai centres in 2014.

Table 3.4 Riyadh event centre and global event centres

<i>Comparisons</i>	<i>Los Angeles</i>	<i>Abu Dhabi</i>	<i>Dubai</i>	<i>Riyadh</i>	<i>Las Vegas</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>
Management	Los Angeles government	Abu Dhabi Exhibition Co.	Dubai Commercial Global Centre	Commercial Chamber	Commission for Exhibitions & Conferences	Hong Kong Council for Commercial Development
Size Area (m ²)	81,000	75,000	59,000	15,000	180,000	29,000
Meeting halls capacity	4 halls with different sizes	A hall with a capacity of 6000 persons & 22 halls with different sizes	A hall with a capacity of 4500 persons & 20 halls with different sizes	A hall with a capacity of 1300 persons & 10 halls with different sizes	42,000 m ²	2 exhibition halls with a size area of 6,000 m ² & 53 meeting hall rooms
Number of events/year	>350	>100	>100	55	>100	1235
Number of visitors/year	2.5 Million	1.8 Million	1.4 Million	1.2 Million mostly from Riyadh	>4 Million	Almost 6 Million
Other services	Advanced technology, hotels, shopping mall	Advanced technology, hotels, shopping mall	Advanced technology, hotels, shopping mall	-	Advanced technology, hotels, restaurants, theatre, sporting facilities & resorts	Restaurants, theatres & business centre
Establishment cost	\$1 Billion	\$2 Billion	\$800 Million	\$90 Million	\$850 Million	\$1 Billion

Sources: SCTCB, 2013.

Sport and festival organizers face similar challenges. Saudi Arabia has only opened one new modern multi-use stadium since 1987 (in Jeddah in 2014). This issue limits the Kingdom capabilities to host quality major sporting tournaments as well as festivals and cultural celebrations, which usually take advantage of such venues. As a result, parks and squares are used by event organizers for outdoor events (Smith, 2015).

Government Initiatives to Overcome Challenges and Achieve Potential Opportunities

The SCTNH has announced a number of initiatives to improve the event sector. This section will highlight the most important government initiatives related to developing event tourism, achieving its potential opportunities and overcoming current challenges. The

four following government initiatives address the challenges mentioned in the previous section.

New entry options to the Kingdom

In 2014, GOs including SCTNH supported a new policy allowing the holders of four visa types to extend their length of stay in the Kingdom for up to six months. Holders of pilgrimage visa can extend their length of stay and visit other provinces including Makkah and Madinah (Almgamsi, 2015; ArabianBusiness, 2010), as well as holders of visas for the purposes of visiting family members, conducting business and for medical purposes (GDP, 2012). As the Kingdom hosts over 500 festivals and celebrations per year, tens of business and sport events, has 1711 archaeological sites (SCTNH, 2012) and hosts about 10.1 million foreigners residing in the Kingdom (SAMA, 2015), this new legislation is expected to have positive socio-economic and sustainable impacts on local communities. Easing the conditions of four different types of visas is expected to have positive impacts on events organized around the Hajj season, the archaeological tourism sector, the VFR (visiting friends and relatives) tourism sector, as well as business and medical tourism. These future forecasts are also supported by the current government mega development projects in the two holy cities, including the expansions of the two grand holy mosques to double the number of pilgrims from 3 million to 6 million by 2020 (Alasadi, 2015). In April 2016, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the Saudi Vision 2030, which included increasing the Kingdom's capacity to welcome 30 million Umrah visitors every year by 2030 (SaudiVision, 2016).

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is developing two new types of visa. To increase the attractiveness of the GCC countries and maximize the benefits of the 100 million tourists visiting the GCC countries each year, there are plans for a new unified tourism visa among GCC countries (Alarabiya, 2015a, 2015b) similar to the Schengen Agreement. As UAE and Qatar are hosting the World Expo and the FIFA World Cup in 2020 and 2022; respectively, this unified tourism visa is expected to ease the entry of millions of tourists to Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Saudi events during the six months of the Dubai Expo in 2020 and the month-long FIFA World Cup in 2022 will have a larger market of potential tourists to attract. Additionally, a transit or temporary visa is proposed for seaports and airports. The Saudi Ports Authorities (SPA) announced in 2012 it is planning to develop three cruise ship terminals in the Kingdom (STTIM, 2012). In addition, the General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) has plans for all four international airports to become independent profit centres, instead of depending on government funding (Alhujairi, 2014). To achieve this objective, GACA adopted several strategies to

attract international carriers and increase the number of passengers (Aljaroshah, 2008) including signing a contract with Fraport, a global airport management and consulting business, to develop operational, financial, commercial and human resources of both Riyadh and Jeddah international airports (Farport, 2014). In October 2016, Saudi Arabia's national carrier (Saudia Airlines) announced a 72-hour transit visa as an exclusive offer for its passengers who must be American citizen or USA permanent residents. It is most likely that the Saudi government will entitle other nationalities to its transit visa to facilitate the needs of transit tourists going through its international airports and cruise ports. The new policy allowing the holders of four types of visa to extend their visitation to the Kingdom, and the two new visas (unified GCC visa and transit/temporary visa) are expected to increase accessibility. Eventually, these new policies will increase the number of visitors and tourists at event tourism, and improve the competitiveness of the Saudi tourism industry in the GCC region (Wen & Hou, 2015).

Establishment of the Saudi Exhibitions and Conventions Bureau

Out of 140 economies, Saudi Arabia is ranked 120th for the number of fairs and exhibitions (TTCR, 2013) and 83rd in relation to the number of international association meetings (TTCR, 2015). To address this issue, the National Exhibitions and Conventions Bureau (SECB) was established in 2013 as a new government organization to regulate and manage the business event sector (Alattas, 2015). The SECB role is to supervise, develop and organize the whole sector, to strengthen its contributions to local economy, increase its effectiveness and overcome growth barriers (Alattas, 2015). The SECB strategic goals are to attract investment for the sector through developing current regulations and develop centres for exhibitions and conferences to strengthen the Kingdom capabilities to host major business events with high quality (Alattas, 2015). The SECB aims to improve event quality through developing services standards, provide information for investors and evaluate the economic impacts of business events and their contributions in the GDP (Alattas, 2015).

Since the establishment of SECB, agreements have been signed with the Ministries of Foreign and Internal Affairs, Saudi Customs and Saudi Chambers Council (Alattas, 2015). These agreements speeded up the processes of issuing temporary visas for international speakers and exhibitors, and clearances by customs for exhibited articles at exhibitions (Alattas, 2015). This was done through launching an electronic one-stop station website to facilitate issuing licences for business events (Aleissa, 2016). Before this one-stop e-gate, organizers needed between 18–24 months to receive government approvals to organize business events. Nowadays, all approvals required by

organizers of business events are done through electronic forms with no paperwork needed at all (Aleissa, 2016). SECB also updated the database of all operating organizations in the sector, including professional and organizational associations. Such government support is a necessity for events to be competitive and successful at emerging tourism destinations (Iorio & Wall, 2012). These government initiatives have helped increase the number of conferences and exhibitions to almost 400 events in 2014 (Alattas, 2015). In short, establishing the SECB as a devoted government organisation for business events gave this sub-sector of event tourism the attention and momentum it needed to develop at this stage.

Developing event venues

A second challenge is the limited numbers of event venues and their poor facilities (Abu Rukba, 2015, workshop, 15 July; Alattas, 2015; Alawadi, 2015 workshop, 15 July; Almubarak, 2015, email, 20 July; Alsaif, 2015, email, 20 July). This issue has led to a concentration of business events in Riyadh and Jeddah with only 20% of business events organized in the other 11 provinces. Currently, there are three major venues around the Kingdom which are suitable to host exhibitions with limited side event options; Riyadh International Convention and Exhibition Center, Dhahran Expo and Jeddah International Exhibition and Convention Center. In addition, there are only a few five-star hotels (i.e. Ritz-Carlton Riyadh and Jeddah Hilton) that host business events. To overcome this challenge, several government organizations including SCTNH, SECB, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the Saudi Industrial Property Authority, along with the hospitality sector have implemented strategies to develop excellent venues suitable to host business events. The new King Abdullah Economic City in 2014 established a five-star hotel, which has hosted 90 business events, and is planning to build two conference centres (Alhabeeb, 2015). The Ministry of Finance has begun a new project in Madinah city to establish King Salman International Center for Conferences, which will be able by next year to host 2500 guests in its large conference hall and 1550 guests in its multi-purposes halls (Alharthi, 2015). All these current and upcoming business event venues are expected to attract more conferences, forums, meetings, exhibitions, other business events and indoor festivals. Developing event tourism venues will have positive impacts on many other tourism sectors (Getz, 2008). For example, to meet the expected increase in business tourist numbers, the Saudi hospitality sector increased its capacity from 184,832 hotel rooms in 2011 (MAS, 2012a) to 446,603 hotel rooms and hotel apartments in 2016 and aiming to reach 621,600 hotel rooms and hotel apartments by 2020 (NTP, 2016).

The number of sports facilities also is being increased. Prior to 2014, the only modern sporting stadium was King Fahad Stadium in Riyadh, which is able to host more than 70,000 spectators. In 2014, the new King Abdullah Sports City opened with the main stadium capacity at 62,241 (second largest in the Kingdom and 10th in the Arab world), and smaller sports venues inside and outside the main stadium. Along with its sporting facilities, this multi-use stadium is equipped with seven mosques, media centre, electronic gates, smart seating system and several large halls and small meeting rooms, allowing it to host business event as well as sporting events. Multi-purpose facilities are not only able to host a variety of events, but they are also able to increase seatings capacity and thus are more sustainable (Parrish, 2013). The use of technology in such facilities supports crowd management and enriches the event's participants. A multi-purpose facility is being built in the 11 other provinces. With 13 large sporting facilities, the Kingdom will be able to bid for major and mega events. Event organizers are beginning to promote this infrastructure. The SCTNH branch in Alqassim province, for example, has launched a new marketing campaign *spectate and explore Alqassim*, which aims to attract spectators of football teams playing against Alqassim local teams to extend their visit and explore other tourism attractions within the province (Alhamli, 2014). With more collaboration between SCTNH and the General Presidency for Youth Welfares (government organization responsible for sporting events), more sport events could be organized with an appeal to tourists.

As mentioned earlier, one of the challenges is the limited options to hold events in public spaces. Recently, the SCTNH succeeded in increasing the number of registered sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List to four, and it is working on adding 10 more sites from around the Kingdom as part of the Custodian's Program of Kingdom's Cultural Heritage Care (SCTNH, 2015a). Such strategies enhance destinations ability to attract international tourists (Huang *et al.*, 2012) and increase its competitive advantages (TTCR, 2015). Organizers of heritage events and celebrations are taking advantages of these public spaces (Smith, 2015). In 2013 and 2015, Historic Jeddah Festival and Riyadh Eid Celebrations have been launched at two UNESCO World Heritage sites, respectively. In addition, the SCTNH and Riyadh Municipality have built sites to host Souk Okaz and Riyadh festivals, respectively. Thus, stadia, conference and exhibitions centres, five-star hotels, heritage sites and public spaces are being used to overcome the challenge of limited venue numbers.

Motivating quality services and best practices

Improvements in event management services are also needed to raise the quality of events (Go & Govers, 2000; Lee, 2001) and food

festivals and business events have developed accreditation systems (Okumus *et al.*, 2007). SCTNH has also developed the Saudi Excellence in Tourism Awards to improve service quality. Since it was first organized in 2010, the excellence award programme has developed rapidly to reach 37 major awards under six categories (SCTNH, 2015b). The award programme has motivated public and private organizations from across the tourism spectrum, and individuals in the Saudi tourism industry to create new quality tourism products and to help achieving SCTNH strategic goals. Some seven out of 37 awards target the event tourism sector (SCTNH, 2015b). In recent years, the tourism awards have attracted media attention and are expected to have positive impacts on the quality of all types of event tourism.

Developing event management education and professionalism

In Saudi Arabia, only a limited number of event organizers have an event management qualification. According to Alsarraj (2015), the head of the constitutional committee of the Saudi Event Management Academy (SEMA), a large number of those who belong to the event sector are not professionally qualified and they depend on their acquired expertise. This issue resulted in poor quality events in relation to sustainability and risk management practices. In relation to sustainability, musical festivals in Abha and Jeddah and the King Abdulaziz Award for Camels have triggered some resentment among their hosting communities (Algemaiha, 2007). Other events including Jeddah Historic Festival and Saudi Higher Exhibition in Riyadh have been criticized for the lack of sufficient parking spaces, causing traffic jams and having negative impacts on nearby neighbourhoods. In relation to risk management, major Saudi events including Aljanadriyah Festival, Riyadh International Book Fair and Souk Okaz lack professional written risk management plans. All these events have experienced disruptive incidents. In 2012 Aljanadriyah's gate security personnel could not deal with protesters and eventually called riot police who used warning shots to end the situation (Alkhfi, 2012). In Riyadh and Jeddah Book Fairs, small groups of people usually protest against the participation of female authors in side events or interactions with male audiences (Sims, 2015). To deal with all these issues of low professionalism, SCTNH motivated public and private organizations to develop tourism, hospitality and event management education and training programmes around the Kingdom.

The first tourism and hospitality college was established in 1995 under the umbrella of the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC), offering diplomas in tourism and hospitality management. Post 2000, SCTNH advised a number of Saudi

universities to establish tourism and hospitality colleges around the Kingdom (see Table 3.5). In 2005, the first public college of tourism and archaeology awarding bachelor degrees in the field was launched at King Saud University. In the last decade, 63 tourism educational institutions have been established or are under establishment in Saudi Arabia. To ensure their quality, about half of these institutions are operated by American, Canadian and Australian institutions (COE, 2013). Currently, there is only one diploma programme in event management offered by the Tourism Institute at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah and few short courses (2–5 days) offered by private training centres (see Table 3.5). The SCTNH has also established (along with private investors) the Saudi Event Management Academy (SEMA), which is planning to be launched in Riyadh in 2016 (SEMA, 2015). SEMA plans six new branches between 2021 and 2025: two in western region, two in eastern region and two in other GCC countries (SEMA, 2015). In addition to the 50 institutions listed in Table 3.5, there are over 25 private training centres distributed around the Kingdom that offer short programmes in tourism and hospitality subjects (SCTNH, 2016b).

Table 3.5 List of major Saudi institutions providing event management degrees and courses

<i>Diplomas and Certificates in Event Management</i>					
<i>No</i>	<i>Name of Institute</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Umbrella</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Ownership</i>
1	Lincoln Qatif Female College	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Alqatif	MIX.
2	Oxford Almadinah Female College	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Almadinah	MIX.
3	Almadinah Tourism & Hospitality College – Laureate	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Almadinah	MIX.
4	Makkah Female College – Laureate	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Makkah	MIX.
5	Riyadh Tourism & Hospitality College – Laureate	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Riyadh	MIX.
6	Wadi Aldawaser Female College – Laureate	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Wadi Aldawaser	MIX.
7	Alnammas Female College – Laureate	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Alnammas	MIX.
8	Buraydah Female College –	Diploma	College of	Buraydah	MIX.

Laureate			Excellence (TVTC)		
9	Alkharj Female College – Laureate	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Alkharj	MIX.
10	Unaizah Female College – Hertfordshire London Colleges	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Unaizah	MIX.
11	Niagara Altayef Tourism & Hospitality College*	Diploma	College of Excellence (TVTC)	Altayef	MIX.
12–17	Saudi Academy for Event Management*	Diploma	Under TVTC supervision	6 cities	MIX.
18	Ejada International	Certificate	Under TVTC supervision	Riyadh	PRV.
19	News Maker for Media Training	Certificate	Under TVTC supervision	Riyadh	PRV.
20	Riyadh Chamber Commerce & Industry	Certificate	Stand-alone organization	Riyadh	Not-for-profit
<i>Degrees in Tourism & Hospitality Management with Event Management Courses</i>					
No	Name of Institute	Degree	Umbrella	Location	Ownership
21	Tourism College	Bachelor	King Abdulaziz University	Jeddah	GOV
22	College of Tourism & Management	Bachelor	Alfaisal University	Jeddah	PRV.
23	High Training Institute of the Saudi International Academy for Tourism & Hospitality	Diploma	Under TVTC supervision	Jeddah	PRV.
24	College of Tourism & Management	Bachelor	Um Alqura University	Makkah	GOV.
25	College of Tourism & Archaeology	Bachelor	King Saud University	Riyadh	GOV.
26	Deanship of Continuing Education & Community Services	Diploma	Alyamamah University	Riyadh	PRV.
27	Travel & Tourism Department	Diploma	Institute of Public Management	Riyadh	GOV.
28	Saudi High Tourism Institute	Diploma	Higher Institute for Tourism	Riyadh	PRV.
29	Alhokeer Institute for Tourism	Diploma	Alhokeer Holding Co.	Jizan	PRV.

30	College of Arts & Humanities	Bachelor	Jizan University	Jizan	GOV.
31	Community College	Diploma	Jizan University	Jizan	GOV.
32	College of Tourism & Hospitality	Bachelor	TVTC	Almadinah	GOV.
33	Community College	Diploma	Taiba University	Alola	GOV.
34	College of Tourism*	Bachelor	Taiba University	Almadinah	GOV.
35	Ibn Rushd College for Management Sciences	Bachelor/MBA	Under Ministry of Education supervision	Abha	PRV.
36	College of Tourism*	Bachelor	King Khaled University	Abha	GOV.
37	Travel & Tourism Department	Diploma	Institute of Public Management	Dammam	GOV.
38	Saudi High Tourism Institute*	Diploma	Higher Institute for Tourism	Alkhobar	PRV.
39	Alhokeer Institute for Tourism	Diploma	Alhokeer Holding Co.	Albaha	PRV.
40	College of Tourism & Archaeology	Bachelor	Hail University	Hail	GOV.
41	Community College*	Diploma	Tabouk University	Tabouk	GOV.
42–48	Technical Colleges (7 colleges)	Diploma/Bachelor	TVTC	7 Cities	GOV.

(*) Institutions under establishment.

Sources: COE, 2013; IRC, 2015; MENA, 2013; MOE, 2015; SEMA, 2015; TVTC, 2013.

At a macro-level, improved professional practices are needed to develop the sector. Currently, there are four exhibitions related to construction and real estate being held in Jeddah every year. During the second Saudi Forum for Conferences and Exhibitions held in Riyadh in 2014, Waleed Alharthi, a major Saudi exhibition organizer, raised the issue that protective regulations are needed to prevent other organizers from organizing similar events in the same city. On the other hand, to improve the quality of Saudi events, SECB has implemented new regulations for new organizations to become licenced event organizers, and it started issuing penalties to current event organizers who did not meet certain government standards (Alattas, 2015). It is expected that the new strategies to develop event

management education and training will raise professionalism level, at micro- and macro-levels, and increase the number of organized events. Although the level of professionalism is still a serious challenge facing the event tourism sector to overcome, recent government actions predict the decline of this phenomenon. These strategies and regulations will result in more jobs within the Saudi tourism industry, and reduce the current high unemployment rate (NTP, 2016).

Conclusion

Currently, Saudi Arabia is ranked 62nd on the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCR, 2015). With the Kingdom's tourism potentials and the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTNH) ambitions, the Saudi tourism industry is expected to climb the TTCR index. The Kingdom is located in the middle of the world, between Europe, Asia and Africa, hosts the Hajj, an annual mega event, has rich local cultures, four heritage sites listed on the UNESCO list, 1711 archaeological locations, and its nature-based tourism is untapped. In relation to its event tourism sector, SCTNH leads several GOs and the private sector to maintain the growth in numbers of food festivals, heritage events and seasonal celebrations. Based on the data collected from secondary resources as well as Saudi tourism experts, the top three challenges in developing the event tourism sector are the limited entry options for international tourists, global and regional competitions, and the limited number and sizes of event venues (Almaddah *et al.*, 2015; Colliers, 2011; MAS, 2015a). To overcome the challenges, SCTNH supported the development of three new entry options for international tourists, established the Saudi Exhibitions and Conventions Bureau (SECB) to develop business events, motivated quality services and event best practices and supported the development of event management education and professionalism. The new Saudi Vision 2030 and National Transformation Program (NTP, 2016; SaudiVision, 2016) are expected to give the tourism industry new momentum to overcome its challenges and achieve its 2020 and 2030 objectives.

To improve the event sector, it is recommended to develop policies to protect food festivals being copied, moving heritage events to public spaces, spreading seasonal celebrations around the four seasons instead of concentrating them in the summer season, and around the Kingdom instead of being organized at high-density provinces, and increasing the number of sport and business events. There is also a need to improve the quality of event planning and the human resources operating events. Saudi Arabia can learn a lot from UAE and Qatar, which are respectively ranked 24th and 43rd on the TTCR index (TTCR, 2015), and other successful tourism destinations from

around the Arab world to develop events that are more sustainable and risk-free. On the other hand, many tourism destinations in the Arab world can learn from the Saudi tourism industry. In particular, UAE and Qatar, who are respectively hosting the Expo 2020 and FIFA World Cup in 2022, can learn from Saudi GOs experiences in operating the Hajj. The cumulative experiences made Saudi GOs experts in mega-event risk management including crowd management, communicable and non-communicable diseases control and counter terrorism security management. Nevertheless, Arab destinations can learn from the SCTNH leadership role in growing the number of event tourism. Special attention should be given to the winners of the excellence in tourism awards, as lessons can be taken from awarded events and event organizers.

Currently, there are three tourism and event research centres at SCTNH, King Saud University and Um Alqura University (CTHIHR, 2015; MAS, 2013; PSC, 2013). These centres and other individual researchers can provide vital information for planning (Getz & Page, 2016) and government initiatives (Monshi, 2010). Future research should consider identifying Saudi tourist's motivations in attending events inside and outside the Kingdom as market orientation is among the first steps in designing successful events (Monshi, 2015). Results from such research represent opportunities for event organizers to stage new events that meet Saudi resident's needs. On the other hand, connecting to Saudi event organizers to identify the challenges in staging all three types of event tourism through scientific research is essential to understand the supply side of the sector. Outputs from research related to potential event visitors and existing event organizers can be vital inputs to Saudi GOs in developing tourism policies and programmes supporting the event tourism sector. Finally, research is important to evaluate the impact of current government initiatives as it provides scientific feedback for the benefit of SCTNH.

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