



# Tourism, terrorism and migration

by Roderick Parkes

Tourism is enjoying an oddly high profile in the news these days. Everywhere from China (which is actively eclipsing the US as number-one source market) to Russia (where the recent Flydubai crash at Rostov-on-Don airport raised questions of traveller safety), tourism has become a political issue. But it is the recent spate of terrorist attacks on sightseers in Turkey, Tunisia and Egypt which has really put tourism back on the front pages, as well as emptying out beach resorts.

Those following the news will have noted another trend, too: it is migration which increasingly links these stories about tourism and terrorism. Migrants are moving away from terror-plagued countries like Syria and Iraq, as insurgency and terrorism establishes themselves as the top root-causes of global asylum. And they are crossing the same brittle tourist-economies they once frequented as vacationers – Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey – on route for the more stable economies of Europe.

Perhaps it is no surprise, therefore, that some sensationalist press headlines now paint all migrants as ‘terrorists or tourists’: migrants, after last year’s influx into Greece, have been described as making use of smuggling services like conventional tourist agencies and of pushing tourists out of

resorts and filling up the vacancies themselves. They are also accused, following the initial alleged migrant involvement in the Paris terror attacks, of importing conflict from their home societies into the EU.

Behind the populism, however, lies a grain of truth. Globalisation has in fact been based on the premise of trying to turn ‘terrorists’ into ‘tourists’ – of transforming poor and badly-run economies into modern consumer societies by giving young workers there proper jobs. As some Western policies seem to backfire, and revisionist powers like Russia and China flex their muscles, migration, tourism and terrorism are growing in profile as well as blurring.

## Globalisation, modernisation and mobility

Western governments have committed themselves to the task of global economic convergence and modernisation. This means ushering poorer economies up the development ‘ladder’, whereby the West guides energetic workers in poor countries from marginalisation to full participation in the world economy. The slogan of ‘turning terrorists into tourists’ has emerged to represent the West’s desire to wrest young workers in poor countries from the grips of radicals



who oppose liberalisation and change, and offer them the trappings of modern consumer society.

Wherever the West has promoted globalisation, radical groups have emerged to oppose it, exploiting the anxieties of young workers and offering alternative structures to attain jobs and status. But this alliance between radical groups such as al-Shabaab or the Taliban and young workers has proven weak: whereas the radicals wish to disrupt economic modernisation, youths want greater inclusion in it. Time and again, therefore, governments and employers have been able to break the alliance, buying off workers with better job opportunities and labour rights.

This same pattern played out in the earliest industrial economies. In 19th century Europe, governments and employers broke the anarcho-syndicalist alliance by offering young workers stable jobs and better labour rights, most notably the right to paid holiday – thus laying the foundations of the modern tourist industry. This formative experience gave Europe its equitable approach to economic development, and helped spawn the mantra that globalisation would ‘turn tomahawks into Toyotas, and terrorists into tourists’.

Since the collapse of Communism, Western states have been rolling out this recipe to the rest of the world. They have pressed poor economies to open themselves up to Western trade, aid and investment with the promise that this will create jobs and spread productive technologies, as well as linking them better to the global economy, and by so doing, give young people a reason to remain at home and build democratic institutions (thus squaring the circle of how to combine economic globalisation with national state-building).

But, today, the massive rise in disorderly migration to Europe shows the difficulties with this strategy. Some headlines suggest that economic growth in Africa and Asia seems just as likely to turn terrorists into irregular migrants and tomahawks into rubber dinghies: young workers in these poor economies still seemingly aspire to a Western lifestyle but despair of ever attaining it close to home. They are still turning their backs on terrorist and criminal organisations and pursuing the trappings of modern consumer society, but only by moving abroad and leaving groups

like the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to take hold at home.

## Getting the ‘hump’

Faced with the rise in global migration as well as terrorism, Western states have understandably redoubled their efforts to create jobs abroad. But analysts are finding mounting evidence that raw job creation is not always the solution and can even be part of the problem. For example, the World Bank has been rowing back from its famous 1999 report which claimed that unemployment was the root of all violent extremism, and has conceded that terrorists in fact ‘recruit among the employed, in contexts where there are no effective formal unions’.

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Governments risk unintended consequences when they focus on

short-term job creation at the expense of long-term job quality. Take the case of Afghanistan: according to a 2012 report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), as many as 400,000 young Afghans have entered the labour market yearly, and the government has done reasonably well in providing work for them. But the new jobs are often precarious and seldom entail more than basic manual labour. They are short-term construction jobs, aimed at young men, and they have not brought stability.

Job creation policies often backfire because they create underemployment: young workers, seeking a way out of the dead-end jobs, may turn to radical groups or consider the emigration option. There is also a possibility that workers maybe incentivised to place themselves in the hands of radicals, having calculated that violent extremism is the best way to draw investment from a worried international community. (And the ILO report did indeed chide USAID for creating jobs in precisely those places where security incidents had occurred, and only there.)

Yet many donors have actually come to rationalise these policy misfires. Western states, rather than critically rethinking their job creation schemes, increasingly view the growth in terrorism and disorderly migration as an intrinsic part of the development process – economic modernisation is now conceived as an automatic trigger of violent extremism and migration. Gone, therefore,

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is the old idea of young workers smoothly ascending a 'development ladder'. In its place is the idea of an unavoidable 'development hump' (that is, a prolonged spike in disorder).

It is easy to trace where this idea came from. In the early 2000s, the US experienced what is now considered the definitive 'migration hump'. In 1994, it had agreed a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico in a bid to create jobs south of the border and reduce migration, but the reverse occurred, and the US found itself reintroducing border controls. Washington, having been assured that economic development would automatically reduce migration, naturally sought an equivalent explanation when the reverse occurred.

Yet, there was nothing automatic about the spike: the rise in Mexican migration was a result of more than just economics (NAFTA improved the standing of the US in Mexico, making it a more attractive migration destination) and the volume of migration probably appeared greater than it was (in 2001, the US began paying greater attention to its borders). But above all, the rise was down to poor policy design: despite a flanking agreement on labour standards, NAFTA failed to create decent jobs. So the deal made Mexicans rich enough to travel, but gave them no incentive to stay at home.

## A bridge too far

The West has increasingly embraced this kind of migration from underperforming economies, and institutions like the World Bank have begun to promote the idea that it can actually be conducive to sustainable development. The World Bank, and its regional affiliates, actively advocate such concepts as 'circular migration': rich Western economies should open up their labour markets to low-skilled migrants, who will gain seasonal employment and then return home, creating new jobs at home and fostering cultural tolerance in the West.

The logic is good, and the intentions sound. But the problem remains: this kind of migration is a product of, and not a response to, the underlying disparities in the global economy. It is no surprise, then, that the new schemes have tended

to draw even well-qualified migrants from poor countries into low-skilled work in the West. Moreover, the money these workers remit fuels short-term household consumption rather than public works or new jobs. Rich receiving states also risk seeing their labour rights undercut – although this has not occurred to date.

'Circular migration' is not the only reversal in development policy practice: Western tourism itself is now being promoted as a vector of global development. Tourism can indeed help spread prosperity, and is second only to the oil industry when it comes to job creation and access to foreign revenues. But its critics argue that this concept involves embracing continued global economic divergence (and trying to harness the entrenched spending power of Western vacationers) rather than aiming for economic convergence (and trying to turn poor workers into tourists).

Just as with circular migration, then, the promotion of tourism has not always lived up to its promise. When Mexico built tourist resorts in its Baja California Peninsula and south, it diligently adhered to international best practices and created 'integrated communities' where tourists and locals would live side by side. But this ended up displacing the very people it meant to enrich: only by moving away could Mexico's Mixtec and Zapotec minorities earn enough to purchase land in the new resorts (or indeed fund the grass-roots political movements which opposed the tourist economy).

Developing economies have even used tourism as a means to block broader political and economic liberalisation. When Egypt built up its tourism sector from a niche industry of \$300 million in the 1980s to a massive segment of the economy 20 years later (accounting for a quarter of current account receipts, or \$6.4 billion), it was motivated by a fear of reforming its established industries and unleashing instability. This approach only invited social discontent and terrorism: a series of attacks in 1992 achieved a massive 43% decline in Egypt's tourist receipts.

Western tourists have acted as a provocation to locals everywhere from the Gambia to Thailand. With their paid leisure and vacation days, tourists sit at the very top of the development ladder.



In countries such as Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Turkey and Tunisia they have been targeted by terrorists highlighting cultural and economic disparities, seeking to gain international media attention and thereby curtail their governments' ability to censor the news, or simply trying to 'punish' foreign governments for their actions abroad.

## How tourism became geopolitical

Even in leading emerging economies, underemployment is now becoming a cause of instability – and resentment. These now accuse the West of using globalisation to create a 'global division of labour': according to this narrative, Western firms keep skilled jobs in the West, and transfer their managers out to affiliates in the developing world; they outsource manufacturing abroad, but carefully hive off their technological know-how; and they use liberal Open Skies deals (brutally competitive international airline agreements) to keep their nationals circulating and migrants from poor uncompetitive economies at bay.

Reality, of course, is more nuanced: if the 20th century was characterised by strong economic divergence, with just 10% of countries moving up into the high Western income bracket, the first decade of the 21st century decisively closed the gap. Yet, it is true that most leading emerging economies do owe their recent catch-up to sheer size, rather than to innovative services or tech sectors. Now they are either throwing state aid behind their own multinational firms in a bid to take control of globalisation, or are simply sewing instability to erode the West's advantages.

In this context, even something as seemingly apolitical as tourism is getting caught up in the reordering of the global economy. Tourists are viewed as a privileged international class of acquisitive investors. Catch-up economies like China will invest massively in providing tourist opportunities for their workers. And, while it would be wrong to see an event like the Flydubai crash as evidence of Russia somehow creating instability through its cavalier attitude towards air safety, it is the case that Moscow has tried to punish geopolitical rivals in the Middle East by restricting tourist flows.

This is about geo-economics. For decades tourism remained a largely Western privilege, and poor economies complain that this is evidence of the way the West rolled out a global system which continues to perpetuate its historic advantages: tourism relies on employers being able to save a few days labour and to guarantee their

employees safe passage to their destination. But only employers which control the world's 'means of production' (the cutting-edge technologies foster productivity) and 'means of connection' (airlinks) can do this – and these sit almost exclusively in the West.

Terrorists may be caught up in the effort to rewire the global economy, too. They are the perennial opponents of Western-style developmentalism, and it is logical to assume that they will receive tacit support from spoiler states or be crushed by emerging economies seeking to emulate the West's successes. And while it would be wrong to believe that states would base such activities on a narrow economic rationale, some powers may be tempted to believe that they are using terrorists to roll back a whole system of Western cultural and political dominance.

As for migrants, they are not 'all tourists and terrorists'. But the three categories are not neatly separated either. Migrants may previously have been connected to radical groups offering status and employment. And they may be gravitating towards the tourist lifestyle – not least by developing their own means of connection (using smuggler services to cross borders) and seizing the means of production (by gate-crashing Western labour markets). Their status, in transition between two extremes, may in turn make them attractive to powers seeking to reorder the global economy.

## Recognising the links

Simply put, Western governments and firms have embraced a certain model of economic development, which they have steadily rolled out from their own industrialising societies to the rest of the world. Until now, the pattern has been one of dissent followed by progress. But it is becoming contested, and by-products such as terrorism, migration and tourism are emerging with it. Recognising the links between these phenomena should provide a sound basis for a response to an increasingly hostile environment.

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