CHALLENGES OF NATION RE-BRANDING SYRIA: PERSPECTIVES OF SYRIAN TOURISM SUPPLIERS

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Abstract

This paper examined the marketing strategies and directions of the Syrian Ministry of Tourism (MOT) since the start of the war in 2011, and also to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing the nation branding strategy and changing its prolonged negative image related with the war, and terrorism at the tourism level. By using the case study approach, and conducting eight semi-structured interviews with officials and workers in the public-private tourism sector, a SWOT analysis was performed. The paper concluded that MOT has adopted the strategic approach in setting plans to resume the tourism sector on the strategic term, targeting the markets of friendly countries, and activating cultural, religious and domestic tourism. It was also found adopting a *collective amnesia* approach, as it did not refer to the products of war in its marketing programmes. The most prominent challenges were: lack of awareness of the concept of nation branding, development of legislative and regulatory frameworks for infrastructure restoration, lack of effective participation of stakeholders and the economic sanctions imposed by the US and EU. So, the importance of this study is that it is the first of its kind that examines in-depth the MOT' plans and the challenges of implementing the nation brand strategy in Syria.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the nation brand theory (NBT) has received great popularity and attention. It has been widely used in recent decades as a "soft power" for improving place perception. This theory refers to a wide range of activities that governments and other stakeholders have implemented to marketing and promoting a place vision (Papadopoulos, 2004). In the era of globalization, countries that adopt place (destination, region, nation) re/ branding campaigns to build a positive image will get greater access to many advantages such as attracting foreign direct investment, promoting exports, and attracting tourists and international students (Dinnie, 2015). Its advocates recommend that it could be particularly helpful in small and economically weak countries looking to achieve an internationally competitive advantage (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2015). All disasters and crises, natural and human-induced activities (terrorism, political violence) have many negative effects on the country's image and, most importantly, on the perception of international tourists (Avraham, 2020; Corbet, O'Connell, Efthymiou, Guiomard, & Lucey, 2019). The main challenge for tourism management organizations is how to deal with the crisis and define the measures required to reform the country's tourism image (Barbe, Pennington-Gray, & Schroeder, 2018). Since the nation branding included promoting the desired image of the nation through the application of marketing and branding techniques (Fan, 2006), it has increased in popularity among many countries (such as the former Soviet Union, Japan, Germany, ...) that have been exposed to various forms of natural disasters and crises as a tool to alter and change the undesirable and stereotypical image and prejudices associated with its history in the minds of the target audience (Tourists, investors,...), and to redefine itself and building a new national identity after crises to be presented in the target markets (Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Subsequently, it provides many important economic benefits and self-respect (Anholt, 2007). However, rebranding campaigns require a lot of investment, and their success cannot be predicted, so they can be considered activities involving a high degree of risk (Amujo & Otubanjo, 2012).

In 2011, the political situation in Syria escalated with the start of protests in Arab countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. The crisis in Syria began in the form of internal protests and demonstrations; however, it soon developed with the gradual intervention of Islamic militant groups (namely ISIS) and various opposition countries like the USA, Turkey, and many Western countries, that the country became involved in a bloody and violent internal war. There are various estimates reaching billions of dollars for the size of the damage and losses incurred by Syria as a result of the war. The last ESCWA report, issued in September 2020, estimated the losses and damages to the physical capital in Syria at about 117 billion $. (ESCWA, 2020). The tourist image of Syria has been damaged and affected negatively, and has become linked to war, killing, and destruction, as well as terrorism due to the emergence of terrorist groups such as ISIS in some areas of Syria. A report by the Syrian MOT in 2016 indicated that 45% of the tourism establishments (accommodation, catering, and entertainment) had gone out of service and operation and the tourist arrivals decreased by 98% at the beginning of the war (MOT 2016). The tourism industry has ceased to exist (Al-Hamarneh, 2013), which was

considered an important and strategic economic support for the national economy, accounting for 14% of Syria's GDP in 2010 before the outbreak of the war (ANBA, 2019). It can be said recently that the country is witnessing a kind of relative calm due to the decline in the pace of the military conflict. On the other hand, it may seem strange that MOT did not stop its attempts to confront the war and its repercussions by developing strategic plans to change the tourist reality and convey the positive image associated with civilization and culture about Syria to the world. Several initiatives were launched during the period of the war, including *Safe Country*, *Live a Recovery Phase,* and *Syria always beautiful*. It aimed primarily at confronting the anti-media campaigns that distorted the image of Syria and then attracting tourists and tourism investments (ANBA, 2019).

Nation rebranding and image restoring researches urged the need to study the cases of countries suffering from political conflicts and long-term negative images to identify the initiatives and marketing strategies and the challenges that face their implementation (Avraham, 2015, 2018; Avraham & Ketter, 2016). This is because that most studies focus on the cases of countries in the post-crisis context (Avraham & Ketter, 2013). Accordingly, Syria represents an interesting case for contemplation to learn about its initiatives in nation branding and the challenges accompanying it during the war. To achieve this goal, the MOT's plans the years of the war (2011-2020) were reviewed to identify its strategies to confront the physical and cognitive repercussions of the war, and the challenges it faces in implementing them by performing a SWOT analysis. Semi-structured interviews were also used, where in-depth interviews were conducted with eight experts and individuals working in the tourism industry in the public sector. and to extract the main issues related to the most important challenges.

The contents of this article begin with providing a brief overview of the literature of the nation branding, followed by a summary of the tourism situation in Syria. After that, the methodology will be explained, in the final section, the results will be discussed and analyzed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Nation Branding of Conflict-ridden Destinations
Over the last decades, in the context of globalization and fierce competition between countries to attract capital and tourists, many countries have paid great attention to the phenomenon of NB, so they have adopted many branding campaigns and launched many slogans to change their competitive position internationally at the tourism level, for example, "Cool Britannia," "Incredible India," "Creative Denmark," "Iceland Naturally," (Van Ham, 2008, p. 133). It is noted that there is no consensus on a common definition of the concept of NB and its components due to its complexity and confusion with other concepts, such as destination brand, place brand, and country brand (Fan, 2006; Hao, Paul, Trott, Guo, & Wu, 2019). Fan (2006) linked the concept of NB and image promotion by using branding tools and strategies "Nation branding concerns applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image" (Fan, 2006, p. 6). Pappu and Quester (2010) focused in their definition of the country brand on using brand

elements (name and logo) to establish a distinct identity in the target international markets. Anholt (2005) definition focuses on the evaluative dimension of the strengths of each country's brand by evaluating the six dimensions of national competence. So, these definitions in general focused on the importance of NB in creating reputation economically, socially, and politically. While Osei and Gbadamosi (2011) point out that the nation brand can also be used to correct negative perceptions of places (destinations, regions, and countries) that have experienced crises.

Avraham and Ketter (2013) identified two types of negative destination images. The first type results from the occurrence of sudden and unexpected crises and disasters such as natural disasters and terrorist operations. While the second type represents a long-term and deep-rooted negative image that results from long-term problems such as political instability, ongoing war, and economic problems. The Middle East region in recent decades has been marked by prolonged conflicts, political turmoil, and terrorism. Beirman (2020) pointed out that the ongoing conflict in some countries did not prevent them from carrying out marketing and promotional campaigns for the tourism sector, such as Israel and Sri Lanka, to create public awareness in the target markets of the measures taken to address the problems experienced by those countries. These campaigns included aggressive strategies to attract tourists like; promotion of alternative images, isolation, and promotion of safe areas, etc. Concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict since 2000 that has not ended to this point, several researchers have reviewed the rebranding efforts, and marketing and promotional initiatives adopted by Israel to combat negative stereotyping (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Krakover, 2013). Dart (2016) referred to the role of organizing sporting events in rebranding Israel, while Isaac (2013) adopts the vision of the Palestinian side in rebranding. Egypt has also been subjected to much political turmoil and terrorist campaigns against tourists, which negatively affected the tourism industry and the general economy. Nassar (2012) studied the challenges of developing the tourism sector in light of the January 2011 revolution and suggested strategies to mitigate its impact. Buda (2016) also presented the challenges facing Jordan's tourism resulting from the repercussions of the ongoing sociopolitical conflicts of neighboring countries such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the war in Syria. From Asia, a similar case can be mentioned, Sri Lanka, which experienced a civil war for years between the central government and Tamil. After the war ended, Sri Lanka developed its tourism in a prosperous way, without referring to the experiences or products of the war, and therefore adopted the strategy of denial (Beirman, 2020), which is a common denominator with what MOT is currently doing in its marketing programs. It can be said that there is a similarity between the Sri Lankan conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the conflict in Syria, where the conflict in these cases is a long-term and complex mixture of terrorism, war, and international interventions. Reflecting on these cases will provide a useful guide for officials of MOT. Studying these cases, especially those similar to Syria, will provide a useful guide for officials of the Ministry of Tourism for planning to rebrand and alter its prolonged negative image.

Indicators of the Syrian Tourism Sector during the War

Syria was ranked as the most insecure country in the world and the most prevalent for violence and terrorism, according to the Global Peace Index from 2016 to 2018 (IEP, June 2020). According to the estimates of the UNHCR, the Syrian war has left hundreds of thousands of deaths, an estimated 570,000 people, and caused the displacement of nearly 7 million people from their homes and more than 5 million refugees around the world (UNHCR, Oct 2020). The latest United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) report, issued in September 2020, covering the period between 2011 and 2019, reveals that 82% of conflict-related damage has accumulated in seven of the most capital-intensive sectors: housing, mining, transportation, security, manufacturing, electricity, and health. The value of the physical destruction of the capital is estimated at $ 117.7 billion, and the loss in GDP at $ 324.5 billion, which puts the total economic cost of the conflict at about $ 442 billion (UNESCWA, 2020). The international economic sanctions have caused a decrease in the purchasing power of the Syrian national currency and have also had negative repercussions on the tourism sector.

Syria is distinguished by its richness of civilization that extends over thousands of years BC, as it includes the oldest inhabited cities in history such as Damascus and Aleppo, as well as six archaeological sites registered in UNESCO (UNESCO, 2011). MOT focused on highlighting its cultural identity to attract tourists from OECD countries, and as a destination for summer and holidays in Arab markets. Syria was witnessing an increasing tourist turnout before the start of the civil war in March 2011. According to MOT, the tourist arrivals reached about 6 million foreign tourists in 2009, reaching 8.5 million in 2011. Tourism revenues were estimated at 8.4 billion USD in 2010, which equates to 12% of Syria's GDP and 11% of employment (The National News, 2011). By 2015, the tourism sector was affected significantly after the outbreak of the civil war by 98%. In other words, the tourism industry almost ceased to exist (Al-Hamarneh, 2013), tourist facilities stopped working, and many tourist attractions were damaged or destroyed due to the war. This imposed a huge financial burden on the Syrian government to be able to resume tourism activities again (Telegraph, March 2014). The pace of violence has significantly decreased in recent years in several areas of the Syrian territories, especially the capital "Damascus" and the surrounding areas. MOT said that the number of tourists coming to Syria in 2019 increased by 46%, and the number of arrivals reached 2.1 million, of whom 1.9 million were Arab tourists. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in Syria, Arab tourists (Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan) make up the majority of tourists, and they mostly have kinship and friendship relations with the Syrians by the neighbourhood. The war negatively affected tourist arrivals. **Fig. 1** shows the Arab tourists versus foreign tourists' arrivals before and after the war in 2011.
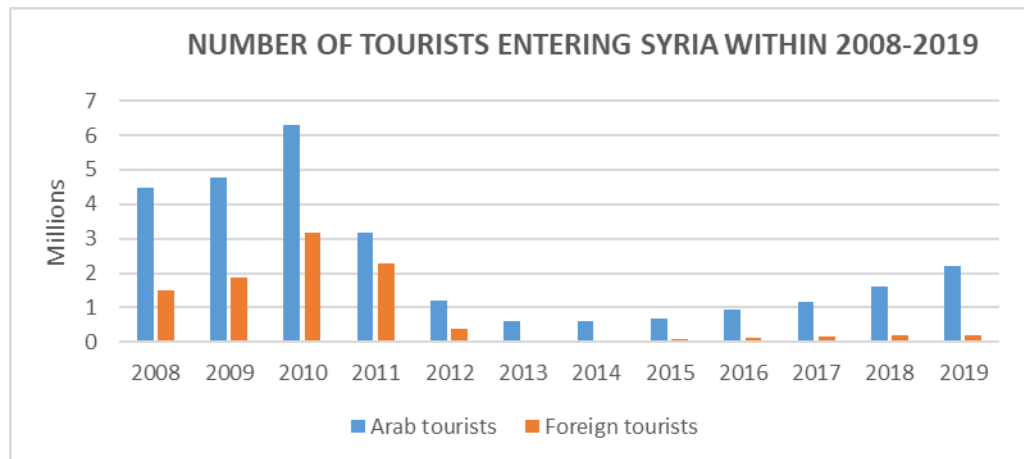
Fig. 1. Arab tourists versus foreign tourists coming to Syria before and after the war in 2011 (CBS, 2021)

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research provides an opportunity for researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena that involve complex or unclear issues (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018). The study tried to focus on providing a broad and deep understanding of rebranding strategies and the challenges facing Syria in building its brand. The case study is adopted as an appropriate research strategy in the case of the inability to separate the phenomenon from its general context, so it enables us to understand the scope and depth of the case (Yin, 2011).

Data Collecting Method

The plans and strategies of the Syrian MOT, especially during the war until 2020 to change the long-term negative image, will be analyzed by reviewing the secondary literature related to MOT plans published on its official website, and the related social media, as well as through eight semi-structured interviews conducted, during a trip to Syria that lasted from March to August 2020, with workers in MOT, stakeholders, and specialists in tourism marketing and branding. The length of time for each interview ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Digital and transcriptional recording of the interview content was used and translated by the researchers. Interviewee profiles are described in **Table 1** The study sources were diversified to reduce criticisms of the researcher's bias and add reliability to the study.

Table 1. Interviewee profile

Types of organization	Job title	Code
Directorate of planning and international cooperation	Manager	P1
Tourism promotion and marketing directorate	Manager	P2
Tourism investment directorate	Administrator	P3
Federation of Syrian chambers of tourism	Administrator	P4
Tourist offices and agents	Owner of a travel and tourism office	P5
Tourist offices and agents	Owner of a travel and tourism office	P6
Professor at Tishreen University	Consultant in tourism marketing	P7
Directorate of Antiquities and Museums - Latakia	manager	P8

The questions revolved around the main issues related to the three stages of the Corporate Rebranding model proposed by Miller, Merrilees, and Yakimova (2014), brand re-vision, strategy implementation, and stakeholders buy in to obtain expert opinions and identify the most important challenges facing each stage of the nation rebranding of Syria. Questions were prepared and interviews were conducted in Arabic and then translated into English for publication.

Data Analysis

To analyze and sort the factors affecting the nation rebranding of Syria and to obtain organized results, a SWOT analysis was performed, which is a strategic planning method to identify the strengths and opportunities that must be invested, and the constraints (weaknesses) and threats that must be managed and mitigated its impact, as part of its efforts to reposition and altering the negative image on the tourism level.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Reviewing MOT's Strategic Plans

MOT and the Supreme Council for Tourism (SCT) were created according to the Legislative Decree No. 41 of 1972. MOT, in coordination with the Supreme Council of Tourism, undertakes the task of developing and promoting the tourism sector. The SCT includes in its membership: Prime Minister as Chairman, the minister of tourism (as Vice-President), the Ministers of Culture, Local Administration, Interior, Finance, Economy and Foreign Trade, Transport, Information, and the Deputy Minister of Tourism. In 1974, The SCT developed the first national plan for the development of tourism, which included the improvement of tourist resorts in the beaches and the outskirts of Damascus, but the target level was not achieved due to the change in tourism trends, absence of a practical plan for implementation, lack of clarity in the division of roles between the public sector and private, and insufficient regulation (JICA, Jully 1998). Subsequently, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) was sought in 1998 to develop a national master plan for the development of the tourism sector with the target year 2015 encompassed a wide range of issues (infrastructure development, administrative systems, tourist sites, tourism services, promotion and marketing), and markets including Arab countries, foreign countries (Americas, Asia-Pacific countries, etc.) and Syrian domestic tourists. European Union (EU) was also asked in 1993 to develop a program for the development of cultural tourism, for which Syria is famous, and financing programs, which included three components called the improvement of historical sites, marketing, and institutional training (JICA, Jully 1998).

Before the outbreak of the crisis, MOT had developed its strategic plan within the framework of the eleventh five-year plan of the Syrian government (2010-2015). It was seeking to raise the annual contribution of tourism to GDP by 10.5% in 2011 and to 15% in 2015, in addition to achieving an annual tourism growth rate of 9% annually. This could not be achieved due to the outbreak of the war, which caused huge losses, as previously mentioned. This forced MOT to adopt an action plan (2016-2018) as an attempt to confront the war and its devastating consequences. The (2016-2018) action plan included four main

axes: reconstruction of tourism facilities, creation of an investment climate, use of new promotional policies, and development of the efficiency of administrative institutions. concerning marketing and promotion, a promotional campaign was launched under the slogan *Syria always beautiful*, which included publishing dozens of videos on the YouTube platform of MOT with the aim of promoting the cultural, historical and beach tourism that Syria enjoys without referring to the war. This exposed it to harsh criticism by the international media for depicting normal life in Syria as if there was no war. Recently, with the relative stability of the security situation and within the framework of the comprehensive national plan for post-war Syria launched by the Syrian government, MOT in turn prepared the strategic plan (2019-2030) to improve the tourism sector. It aims at the end of the year 2030 to attract 9.6 million visitors, and provide 100 thousand beds, 300 thousand chairs, 104 thousand job opportunities. Furthermore, it is expected to achieve 278 billion Syrian pounds as a new investment and make a qualitative leap in the tourism product (MOT, 2019).

The analysis of the strategic plans reveals that there were four basic issues on the focus of the ministry during the war period to achieve through participation with stakeholders (government agencies, the Federation of Chambers of Tourism, organizations, and professional unions):

1)   Encouraging and attracting local and foreign investments for reconstruction and rehabilitation in the tourism sector.
2)   Tourism planning.
3)   Marketing and tourism promotion to create a positive image of Syria.
4)   Development of human resources.

Table 2 shows the common elements and items for the plans of MOT from 2011 to 2020

Table 2. Common components and items of the plans of MOT from 2011 to 2020

Components of the master plan	Items relating
Tourism investment	Development of legislative and regulatory frameworks for tourism investment Addressing stalled tourism projects by launching implementation processes or ending the contractual relationship and submitting them for investment again Simplifying tourist licensing procedures Establishing a tourism investment forum Developing and updating contracting mechanisms and formulas, positively and negatively, including ensuring the rights of the state and partners Promotion of tourism investment for reconstruction projects in the tourism sector Rehabilitation and maintenance of international hotels belonging to MOT
Tourist planning	Upgrading tourism planning as a way to balanced tourism development Surveying of the elements of tourist attractions in the vicinity of lakes and coasts, caves, parks, and popular parks in preparation for tourism investment in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture and culture
Promotion and Marketing Plan	Working to recruit the religious and cultural tourist groups Focusing on the domestic tourism market Relying on new and friendly markets Establishing and sponsoring several specific activities and events Spreading tourism awareness Supporting initiatives Contributing to preserving civilized and human heritage Return of confidence in Syria as a safe tourist destination to visit Developing promotion tools to keep pace with global tourism marketing Participation in the most important exhibitions and international tourism events
Development of human resources	Upgrading the performance of MOT's employees Staff training and rehabilitation Development of tourism and hotel training and education in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

Rebanding of Syria

The nation re/branding project for a country like Syria, which is still experiencing the effects of war, requires improving the overall environmental conditions of the country, including increasing security and safety, achieving an acceptable degree of political stability, and creating a safe environment for investment in reconstruction, as the participants in the research indicated. The interviewee (P5) stated: "It is essential for the security system of the Syrian government and its branches to work with MOT to protect tourism activities from any risks and advance its strategic security goals…. All material and human resources must be mobilized to achieve effective security". In this regard, the Syrian government has licensed security companies to protect tourist delegations, expatriates, businessmen, and their facilities. While another participant (P3) expressed the encouragement of tourism and investment in safe areas as an alternative to facing the crisis.

Concerning reconstruction, it is noteworthy that MOT has attached great importance to invest in reconstruction of infrastructures in the tourism sector since 2014, as it was waiting for the country to witness a kind of relative stability to include it in the plan clearly as plan (2016-2018) and plan (2019-2030). Accordingly, these plans included addressing stalled and damaged projects by the war, providing all facilities and incentives, and introducing regulatory and legislative changes in the investment law in a way that encourages, attracts internal and external investors and establishes quality mechanisms to rebuild trust with investors.

In light of the war and economic sanctions imposed on Syria, MOT was heading to adopt three policies to determine the target markets: The first is to focus on stimulating domestic tourism (Syrian family tourism, especially low-income groups and rural tourism), especially after the decrease in foreign tourist arrivals because of the economic sanctions. As for the second policy, it focused on restoring the traditional markets that were visiting Syria for the purpose of cultural and religious tourism from the Arab countries such as the GCC states, as well as from Egypt, Iraq, and European countries. The third policy was to "go east" and search for new markets in the countries of friends like Russia, China, and India.

Concerning identity and positioning, MOT emphasized the civilizational, historical, cultural, religious, and environmental identity of Syria as the cradle of civilizations and religions without reference to the war and its detachments. On the other hand, highlighting the potential of dark tourism and adventure tourism, some participants expressed the need to turn the products of this crisis into a tourism opportunity that gives Syria a unique distinction from its neighbors and the world. It is evident from the above that MOT practices "collective amnesia" (Bassols, 2016), it focuses in its plan on not integrating the remnants of conflict and war into its tourism products. They strive to emphasize the "business as usual" strategy to resume tourism activity as it was before the war in 2011. It may constitute a kind of embarrassment for some governments, including Syria, in dedicating the modern negative past as a tool to promote tourism.

Some participants expressed the importance of shedding light on the emotional aspects of the characteristics of the local population to humanize the identity of the brand, and thus, define the personality of the Syrian nation brand. Furthermore, it has to be emphasized the idea that the war has not changed the characteristics of the loving and friendly Syrian people. The interviewee (P3) mentioned: "The characteristics of the local community such as warmth, hospitality, and friendly behavior play an important role in shaping the identity of the Syrian people that has not been affected by the war". On the other hand, one of the interviewees expressed: "If MOT wishes to exploit the war as an opportunity, it could promote new characteristics of the Syrian people, including steadfastness, defiance, and victory over the terror of extremist groups to become part of the nation brand's personality" (P5)

MOT has realized the importance of stakeholders' participation in implementing its strategic plans, especially in the field of reconstruction, tourism promotion, and marketing, including the government agencies, the Federation of Chambers of Tourism, organizations and professional unions, and diaspora as mentioned in the strategic plans of the ministry. Since the beginning of the crisis, MOT has worked with local partners inside the country and international partners to build and rebuild the tourism sector and advance the tourism development process by continuing direct contact with the embassies of friendly countries in the country or communicating with Syrian diplomatic missions in friendly countries to strengthen tourism cooperation with them. They include Iraq, India, South Africa, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Belarus, and the Russian Federation. Building strong relationships with international companies and opening the doors for investment for them in Syria will allow Syria to achieve multiple advantages such as consulting and learning from the experiences of these companies in managing their brand and also in positively promoting the image and improving Syria's reputation when talking about the success of these companies in Syria globally (P6). It is worth mentioning that MOT follows a top-down approach in planning its identity and tourism image, and the role of stakeholders is limited to participating in implementing the ministry's vision. On the other hand, it is noted that the role of residents or their representatives in defining the identity, personality, and visual interpretation of the nation brand as an effective element for the success of tourism through their behaviors and attitudes towards tourism and tourists were absent.

In addition, MOT stressed the importance of paying attention to the training and development of human resources in the recovery phase of the tourism sector to compensate for the lack of efficient and skilled human resources. The MOT plan (2019-2030) includes a set of priorities, including the development and support of the tourism and hoteling education sector by establishing educational centers and institutions and printing educational curricula in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). P3 mentioned: "MOT, in cooperation with UNESCO, may conduct training courses for all those wishing to learn skills for different traditional professions".

MOT has realized the importance of raising awareness of the nation brand of Syria as a destination for cultural and religious tourism by carrying out promotional and marketing activities at home and abroad in partnership with stakeholders, especially expatriates. However, as mentioned previously, MOT is trying to avoid mentioning war or investing war products in its tourism plans. Therefore, some participants suggested that Syria's emphasis on the success stories it achieved during the war in its promotional campaigns could help create positive brand awareness at the regional and international levels like defeating ISIS and terrorism, liberating a large part of the country from the control of extremist groups, as well as restoring security and safety, and achieving peace. This will positively expand brand awareness.

Promotional activities included re-attracting religious and cultural tourism groups and focusing on the internal tourism market. From the beginning of the war up to 2018, MOT used a logo showing the Damascene rose and the architecture of the city of Damascus **Fig. 2**. In 2016, interesting was the absence of the logo dedicated to foreign and non-Arabic speaking markets, as MOT designed a logo in Arabic in 2018 expressing the cultural, heritage, and natural diversity of Syria to attract solely Arab markets **Fig. 3**. Likewise, in the plan (2019-2030), it is noted that it has not adopted an official slogan, tagline, or logo to express its identity through digital platforms or running external exhibitions, shows, or festivals. Price reduction, inviting journalists and bloggers, descriptions, personal testimony of visitors, and "Come and see for yourself" were among the most important strategies that can help MOT persuade tourists to visit Syria, especially in light of the anti-and offensive media coverage of Syria by the European and American media. The main purpose was to address the concerns of potential tourists about visiting a particular destination. by this, marketers hope to show that there is a growing demand on the side of tourists to Syrian destinations and they no longer need to be afraid to visit Syria. A potentially cost-effective strategy for countries that do not have sufficient resources to conduct expensive promotional campaigns is to designate a network of brand ambassadors. Using the network of nation brand ambassadors will be useful in changing the bad mental image of Syria and transferring the positive and desirable identity and personality of the country to the world.

Ministry of Tourism
وزارة الســـياحـــة

Fig. 2. The old SMT logo (2014)

Fig. 3. The new SMT logo (2018)

The fact that event marketing is an important strategy to promote brand awareness and build strong and reliable relationships with target audiences was acknowledged by a large number of interviewees (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6). The interviewee (P2) mentioned: "The ministry is cooperating and coordinating with various local events, popular organizations, professional unions, and social clubs to establish tourism activities, events and festivals to activate domestic tourism (such as *Damascus International Fair*, *Flower Show*, *Damascus Castle Nights Festival*, *Bludan Tourism Festival*, *Young Tourist Festival*, *Al-Sham International Festival for Arabian Horse*, *Al-Sham Festival brings us together*, *Syrian Heritage Festival*, *World Tourism Day*),… It is also keen to participate in foreign tourism exhibitions (e.g., *FITUR* in Spain) in the exporting markets for tourists and to hold festivals, conferences, and promotional film festivals to increase the revenues of the tourism sector and return to Syria to be an important tourist destination in the region…".

It can also be noted that MOT has realized the importance of using modern media instead of traditional media, especially social media. Nowadays, digital marketing, through websites, social media, blogs, mobile devices, and other technologies, has become a major part of tourism destination management and marketing (Avraham, 2020).

The official in charge of the tourism promotion and marketing department in the ministry (P2) said: "The ministry is currently working on activating the use of social networking sites in the tourism marketing process, management and design of social networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and working on a mobile application to promote Syria called "visit Syria" and expand the services provided by the application to include the introduction of tourist facilities with the possibility of electronic reservation in the future, as well as the development of new applications that serve tourism promotion…". In addition, the need to develop tourism content in modern media was expressed by one of the interviewees (P4): "MOT must constantly update the information of ancient sites and tourist attractions in several languages, and respond accurately and clearly to the questions of tourists and others. However, this project is still in its initial stages and is not effectively managed due to the weakness of the administrative staff of MOT in technology and foreign languages".

The development and implementation of projects related to nation re/branding require significant financial costs. In this regard, providing financial resources by "encouraging companies and various stakeholders to provide sponsorships

and financial donations to finance nation brand marketing and promotion strategies" (P2) is considered as one of the beneficial policies for Syria because of the financial burdens it incurs due to war and economic sanctions. The official in charge of the Tourism Promotion and Marketing Department at MOT indicated that initiatives such as "*Antami*" meaning "*I belong*" are being undertaken to restore the damaged Syrian heritage sites and compensate for part of the loss of the tourism sector through the acquisition by Syrian residents and expatriates of the "I belong" icon. This icon is a copy of the oldest Peace agreement discovered in the Kingdom of Ebla (Idlib governorate, northwestern Syria), for 1000 dollars, to be placed in the initiative account at the Syrian Commercial Bank. This initiative was launched in cooperation with the Syrian expatriates through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Poland, Italy, Venezuela, and the USA.

Based on the analysis of the secondary sources of the Ministry of Tourism and the interviews, the strengths and opportunities available for the national rebranding of Syria in the tourism sector, the internal constraints that must be addressed, and finally the risks that must be taken into account and their impact reduced as much as possible, were identified. **Table 3** shows the SWOT analysis for nation rebranding of Syria in the coming period.

Table 3. SWOT analysis (Source: Created by the authors)

Strengths	- Diversity of tourism patterns due to the rich cultural and historical and civilizational diversity: • Cultural tourism attractions (historical archaeological sites) • Religious tourism attractions (Damascene pilgrimage center, Christian Orthodox pilgrimage, Iranian Shiite pilgrims) • Eco-tourism attractions (beaches, mountains, etc.) - Dark Tourism Attractions - Characteristics of the Syrian people - The relatively close distances between the archaeological sites - The government's awareness of the importance of the tourist identity's role in improving the country's image - Focus on domestic tourism
Constraints	- lack of cooperation between the ministry and government organizations and bodies concerning determining the elements of national branding (identity, personality). - lack of a clear division of activities between the private, public, and joint sectors about nation rebranding strategies - Lack of support and commitment from politicians at the highest levels to the nation rebranding strategy - Weak environment for foreign investment - Lack of awareness and experience with the concept of nation branding - Insufficient attention to preserving antiquities - Inability to persuade tourists and build trust because of a strong perception of insecurity and safety - Lack of efforts and capabilities to implement the online Nation Branding - Weak infrastructure and tourism services (electronic infrastructure development) - Limited international aviation services. - Lack of diversity in target markets - Not designing a logo and slogan for the target foreign markets - Weak efficiency of local and international tourism promotion
Opportunities	- Creating brand awareness by investing in war success stories such as the victory over terrorism and extremists - Developing and promoting dark tourism and adventure tourism as a niche market - Effective cooperation with friendly countries and the signing of agreements - Effective cooperation with tourism and international organizations to learn how to develop a nation branding strategy - Activating diaspora networks to obtain financial support and promote the image of Syria - Enhancing the image of Syria as an inexpensive tourist country - Adopting online nation branding and benefiting from digital marketing (lower cost, reducing counter-media control)
Threats	- Failure of the government and MOT to improve the infrastructure of the tourism sector. - Failure to develop legislative and regulatory frameworks to attract the necessary investments to rebuild the infrastructure of Syrian nation Brand - Failure to ensure the participation and commitment of stakeholders in the design and implementation of the nation rebranding strategy - Failure to restore and protect historical archaeological sites (constituting brand identity) from vandalism and theft - Intense negative media coverage - Return of tension - Inability to fully cooperate with neighboring countries - The continuation of unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the USA and UN

CONCLUSION

The study sought to analyze the strategic plans, marketing, and promotional initiatives adopted by MOT, especially since the start of the war in 2011, to rebrand and alter its negative image associated with war, political instability, and terrorism, to identify the directions of MOT in the context of nation rebranding, and the most important challenges and opportunities for implementing this strategy. To achieve this goal, a case study approach was used and semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight individuals working in each MOT and the private sector, in addition, a SWOT analysis was performed.

The Syria case study showed that the priorities of MOT in its strategic plans are similar and share the long-term goals emanating from the general vision of MOT, which included enhancing the contribution of tourism to the national program for the comprehensive reconstruction of the Post-war Syria phase, as a strategic industry that contributes to achieving economic and social development, local development, and strengthening the cultural image of Syria. MOT adopted strategic planning and put in place procedures and qualitative mechanisms to change the tourist reality and address the effects of the devastating war on tourist facilities and archaeological sites. It also focused on planning the image that Syria wants to convey to the world based on highlighting its cultural and civilization identity as a step to confront the anti-Syrian media campaigns. Therefore, there is a strategic direction to adopt the "Branding Contrary to Stereotypes" strategy. MOT is also keen to address weaknesses and the problematic reality of tourism in Syria, such as reduced security and safety by proposing alternatives that contribute to increasing security and safety through licensing security companies to protect tourists and organize tourist itineraries to the safe areas, especially the Syrian coast. Concerning hosting events, it is clear that MOT was keen to hold local activities, events, and festivals during the years of war in safe areas as an attempt to stimulate domestic tourism. this is an important strategy to compensate for the revenues resulting from the decrease in foreign tourist arrivals due to sanctions and negative perceptions about Syria. Due to the European tourists' reluctance to come to Syria, MOT adopted a strategy to *change the target market*, as it headed east towards friendly countries. Hence, it studied these markets and targeted religious tourists in its promotional programs, as Syria possesses the elements of religious tourism (Islamic and Christian).

The study also revealed a set of other challenges represented in the limited participation of stakeholders regarding the nation's image and identity, lack of human resources with experience in branding and digital marketing, lack of funding for reconstruction and tourism promotion, weak legislative and regulatory environment for investment and nation rebranding. On the other hand, the study showed that developing the legislative and regulatory environment to attract foreign investments, improving infrastructure (tourist facilities and archaeological sites), continuing economic sanctions, negative media coverage, and ensuring security and safety are among the most prominent external threats that must work to reduce their impact on the implementation of the national rebranding strategy.

Based on the above, it can be suggested that MOT should adopt formally the nation branding strategy and have the support and commitment from the highest political levels in the country. It should also collaborate interactively with stakeholders, and keep abreast of technological developments and use them more efficiently by adopting communication and promotion strategies, especially through the Internet and social media to ensure the transmission of correct and real information regarding the reality in Syria, and thus, reduce the negative media coverage by the international media. Although Syria applies the concept of "collective amnesia" as it does not wish to consecrate the recent negative past as a promotional tool to avoid embarrassment, it is possible to suggest a reconsideration that MOT should invest positively in this war and its components and include them in its strategic plans for the post-war phase by supporting "promote dark tourism and adventure tourism products" as a "niche tourism market". It may provide it with a competitive advantage as compared to the neighboring countries. Furthermore, it can invest in the victory over ISIS and the liberation of Syrian lands from the grip of extremist groups internally to increase the national pride of the Syrian people by eliminating terrorism, and externally to obtain international sympathy and material support necessary for reconstruction in all economic sectors, the first of which is tourism. It should also invest in its relations with friendly countries such as Russia, China, and Iran to develop the tourism sector and exchange experiences regarding the requirements of nation rebranding.

The use of a small sample that includes 8 individuals and an inductive nature as well as this study relies only on gathering the viewpoints of the supply side of the brand without considering the perspective of the demand side may be considered one of the most important limitations of the study. Future investigations may focus on studying and understanding the challenges separately, which face the application of the nation branding to other countries suffering from political crises, by relying on quantitative methodologies and proposing effective strategies to overcome them. Finally, it should be noted that talking about the national rebranding of Syria may seem early and difficult, especially in light of the current circumstances and capabilities, but it can be adopted and the first steps taken in light of the comprehensive program for reconstruction for the Post-war Syria phase. Thus, this strategy can provide potential positive results for repositioning and changing the negative image and stereotyping of Syria as a tourist destination at the global level.

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