

## **THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS HIGHLIGHTED BY THE 7<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF THE TOURISM WORKING GROUP**

Distinguished Members of the COMCEC Tourism Working Group,

The COMCEC Tourism Working Group (TWG) has successfully held its 7th Meeting on February 4th, 2016 in Ankara, Turkey with the theme of “Muslim Friendly Tourism (MFT): Understanding the Demand and Supply Sides in the OIC Member Countries.” During the Meeting, Tourism Working Group made deliberations for policy approximation among the Member Countries regarding MFT. The Room Document, prepared in accordance with the main findings of the analytical study conducted for the 7th Meeting of TWG and the answers of the Member Countries to the policy questions, was the main input for the discussions. During the Meeting, the participants discussed the policy recommendations given below.

### ***Policy Advice 1. Developing basic guidelines for improving the basic MFT related services***

#### **Rationale:**

The Muslim population is growing rapidly and is expected to be around 26 % of the world's population by 2030. Growing Muslim population and its increasing disposable income would lead to millions to increasingly take up travel for leisure, adventure and exploration. With the increasing number of Muslim tourists, simultaneously there will be a huge demand for halal/muslim friendly products and services. Many Muslim travelers recently are more halal conscious, who prefer halal foods or muslim-friendly services while staying in hotels or having vacation in certain places.

Nonetheless, according to *the Analytical Study*, one of the main challenges faced by Muslim tourists is the lack of common understanding on the basic principles for the muslim-friendly services. This challenge also increases the costs of companies, since they have to follow different practices in this field. In addition, Muslim tourists also face with different practices of companies regarding MFT services. Therefore, developing basic MFT guidelines will greatly help companies to provide MFT services with better quality and to meet the needs of the Muslim travelers.

### ***Policy Advice 2. Increasing awareness of MFT market among the travel industry stakeholders through standardizing terminology used in MFT, introducing market awareness and customer service training programmes and utilizing social media for promotion and marketing.***

#### **Rationale:**

Despite being a relatively new concept within tourism sector, understanding the MFT market and its key components is critical for the OIC member states. In recent years, there are some improvements to increase the awareness about MFT such as, halal travel indicator was developed, more airports have been adding halal certified restaurants and prayer spaces and some airlines started offering Halal Food on board at their flights. Moreover, travel agencies and digital marketing platforms have also been evolving according to growing needs of Muslims such as the Singapore-based company, HalalTrip.com, rates hotels and resorts in terms of their Halal-friendliness since December 2013 and HalalBooking.com provides Muslim-Friendly holidays to travelers etc. Furthermore, some travel agencies have recently launched Luxury Halal Travel focusing on ‘curating’ premium travel experiences like Halal Tour of China and Hong Kong. In addition to these, several conferences have been held on Halal or Muslim Friendly Tourism to enhance awareness in this field.

Despite the existing efforts, except few countries, the awareness of MFT market is still very weak in the OIC Region. Moreover, there is an inconsistency in the use of terminology and definitions related to different aspects of MFT. Therefore, there is a need to

- standardize the terminology used in the MFT,
- introduce roll out market awareness and customer service training programs for the travel and hospitality professionals for the all aspects of MFT.
- Utilize social media and other media tools to provide a significant communication platform for marketing MFT products and services to a wider audience.

***Policy Advice 3. Developing healthcare services and facilities for the MFT market through identifying the different strengths of the OIC Region, building specialization hubs, developing alternative/traditional treatments and wellness programs***

**Rationale:**

Medical tourism is one of the growing markets in tourism sector. It refers to traveling to another country for the aim of obtaining medical treatment or aged care. In order to attract Muslim patients, many countries have begun to provide muslim-friendly services, such as halal food, halal pharmaceuticals, prayer facilities etc. According to the analytical study, OIC has a vast unexploited potential for muslim-friendly medical tourism with relatively more affordable costs. However, there is a lack of awareness about the muslim-friendly healthcare sector in the member countries. In this respect, muslim-friendly healthcare market in the member countries may be promoted for attracting muslim healthcare visitors through identifying the different strengths of the OIC Region, building specialization hubs, developing alternative/traditional treatments and wellness programs based on the strengths of the OIC Region.

***Policy Advice 4. Launching an alliance among the muslim-friendly travel agents/tour operators targeting MFT market***

**Rationale:**

Travel agents and tour operators are the key players for growing muslim friendly tourism market in the member countries. For catering to muslim clients properly, travel agents and tour operators should be aware of the preferences and needs of muslim travelers. However, according to the analytical study, only few SMEs focus on muslim-friendly tourism and they cannot compete with the global players when they enter the MFT market. In order to strengthen these key players, the member countries may launch an alliance of travel agents and tour operators targeting specifically MFT market.

***Instruments to Realize the Policy Advices:***

- ***COMCEC Tourism Working Group:*** In its subsequent two meetings, the COMCEC Working Group will elaborate on the above mentioned policy areas and the sub-areas in a more detailed manner. 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Meetings of the Tourism Working Group will be held with the themes of “Muslim Friendly Tourism (MFT): Developing and Marketing MFT Products and Services in the OIC Member States” and “Muslim Friendly Tourism (MFT): Regulation, Standardization and Certification”, respectively.
- ***COMCEC Project Funding:*** Under the COMCEC Project Funding, the COMCEC Coordination Office calls for project each year. With the COMCEC Project Funding, the Member Countries participating in the Working Groups can submit multilateral cooperation projects to be financed through grants by the COMCEC Coordination Office. For the above mentioned policy areas and their sub-areas, the Member Countries can utilize the COMCEC Project Funding and the COMCEC Coordination Office may finance the successful projects in this regard. The projects may include seminars, training programs, study visits, exchange of experts, workshops and preparing analytical studies, needs assessments and training materials/documents, etc.
- ***OIC/COMCEC Private Sector Tourism Forum:*** In its meetings, the OIC/COMCEC Private Sector Tourism Forum may elaborate on the above mentioned policy areas and the sub-areas from the private sector perspective. In this respect, 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Forum has been held on 14-15 January 2016, with the theme of “Promoting Muslim Friendly Tourism Products and Services in the OIC Member Countries.”
- ***SMIIC:*** SMIIC’s Technical Committee on Tourism and Related Services can be benefited for developing/harmonizing muslim-friendly tourism standards in the member countries.