

UN Tourism Regional Commission for the Middle East
Fifty-second Meeting
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BRIEF ON THE UN TOURISM AFFILIATE MEMBERS

ACTIVITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN (2025/2026)

Agenda Item 5

1. Introduction

This meeting of the UN Tourism Regional Commission for the Middle East (CME) provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the latest activities and strategic direction of the UN Tourism's Affiliate Membership in the region.

The report outlines both the institutional developments and thematic advancements that have characterized the work of Affiliate Members (AMs) across the region, providing insight into strategic objectives, implementation progress, Affiliate Membership status and trends, and upcoming opportunities.

2. Strategic objectives for the Affiliate Membership (2026–2027)

The work of the Organization in this area, carried out mainly through its specialized structure, the Affiliate Members and Public-Private Collaboration (AM-PPC), continues to focus on the strategic objective **to strengthen our Affiliate Membership**.

The ultimate goal of the activity and projects or events carried out by the Department is to enhance the value of belonging to UN Tourism as an Affiliate Member and ensure that each member feels part of a valuable network, through a membership that offers spaces for collaboration, visibility and prestige.

- To this end, AM-PPC dedicated priority efforts to **provide the services, support and facilities** needed to take advantage of the potential offered by the membership, and to **enhance the value of Affiliate Membership** by fostering a stronger sense of belonging among Affiliate Members, increasing satisfaction with membership, and reinforcing institutional loyalty.
- And, continuously **strengthening the capacity of the Affiliate Members network** to contribute value to the Organization, by more effectively engaging existing Affiliate Members in the Organization's agenda and activities, and by pursuing strengthening the network of AMs by a **quality-driven expansion of Affiliate Membership** through the incorporation of strong new members.

These were the strategic objectives established in order to consolidate the Affiliate Membership as a key pillar of the Organization.

2.1. Enhancing the Value of Affiliate Membership

Consistent work is currently being done by the AM-PPC Department in order to **(a)** reach a more effective integration of the Affiliate Members in the Programme of Work, agenda of activities and main projects carried

out by UN Tourism, and to **(b)** permanently improve the facilities and services offered by the Organization to AMs.

- a. It is worth underlying that during the reporting period the efforts to better integrate Affiliate Members into the technical and strategic work of UN Tourism have gained momentum. These actions, pursuing a win-win approach that leverages members' knowledge while offering institutional visibility and influence, reflect the core principles and lines of action established through the recent **Legal Reform** and new **Expansion Strategy**, which aim to strengthen governance and ensure that Affiliate Members from diverse regions—particularly the less represented ones—play a more active role in shaping the global tourism agenda.

Affiliate Members from the Middle East have made notable contributions to the further development of the following thematic areas:

▪ **Sports Tourism:**

- Fujairah International Conference on Adventure Tourism (May 2025), organized by the Affiliate Member Fujairah Adventure Centre with UN Tourism's participation — featuring 14 Affiliate Members as speakers across various sessions and panels.
- 51st Meeting of the Commission for the Middle East (CME): Alongside this meeting, the conference "Sports Tourism and the Tourism Industry After the FIFA World Cup" was held, with the participation of nine Affiliate Members — including Soudah, Ritaj Hospitality, Higher Institute for Tourism & Hospitality, Aamal Travel, Almashreq Hospitality, Nextfairs, Qatari Hotel Association, Qatar Museums, and the Jordan Tourism Board.

- **Gastronomy Tourism:** "Applying Heritage to Hospitality: Advancing Gastrotourism in Saudi Arabia" — a roundtable organized by the Affiliate Member Inaar Consultancy (October 2025) in collaboration with UN Tourism, with participation from UNESCO, and FAO and other 5 Affiliate Members

- **Regenerative Tourism:** Red Sea Global's Workshop on Regenerative Tourism (November 2025) encouraged a shift from traditional sustainable tourism practices to more proactive and restorative approaches. Worth mentioning the participation of other affiliate members from Europe to share their best practices in this topic.

- **Astro-tourism:** the recently launched **UN Tourism Guidelines on Astro-tourism** are being developed with substantive input from Affiliate Members in the Middle East and stakeholders from the region. Key contributors include Co Petra Development and Tourism Region Authority.

- **Thermal Tourism:** The Wellness Tourism Workshop — "Building Capacity for a Competitive Wellness Tourism Segment in the Middle East", hosted by the Regional Office for the Middle East in September 2025.

Red Sea Global and Soudah Development were among the speakers, while other Affiliate Members, including NEOM, the Aseer Development Authority, and the Saudi Tourism Authority, participated actively.

- **Artificial Intelligence and Tourism:** the 2025 publication "**Artificial Intelligence (AI) & the Tourism and Hospitality Sector**" featured representation from Affiliate Members based in the Middle East. Case studies and inputs were provided by NEOM and Colliers Mena. These contributions illustrate the application of AI in areas such as customer personalization, dynamic pricing, predictive analytics, and data-driven sustainability practices.

- b. AM-PPC Department has continued to place priority on the efforts to continuously **improve the services and facilities offered by the Organization** to the AMs.

In this regard, recognizing the importance of the networking, visibility and representation opportunities for our AMs, AM-PPC has provided them with such opportunities for active participation, dialogue and interaction with the governments at all major UN Tourism's Statutory meetings and key events celebrated lately (Executive Councils, Regional Commissions, World Tourism Day celebrations).

Furthermore, similar participation and visibility opportunities were provided for AMs **within the most important International Tourism Fairs** (such as FITUR Madrid, ITB Berlin, WTM London):

- Affiliate Members Corner: A dedicated platform for members to showcase their projects, promote initiatives, exchange ideas, and strengthen dialogue between the public and private sectors.
 - In the framework of the 26th General Assembly, the Affiliate Members Corner focused on "Disruptive Technologies in Tourism", best practices were presented by the Saudi Tourism Authority and Qatar Museums, both of which shared successful experiences in digital innovation.
 - FITUR (January 2026): UN Tourism Affiliate Members Corner - Cross-Sector Value in Tourism featured data-driven presentations and peer exchanges from selected Affiliate members.
- ITB Berlin (March 2025): the Affiliate Members IATA and ICVB Istanbul participated as speakers in the *UN Tourism Ministers' Summit*, reinforcing the AMs perspective on tourism policy.

These were excellent platforms not only to showcase and highlight Affiliate Members' work, but also to facilitate their engagement and collaboration with the governments of the Member States and many other relevant tourism stakeholders.

2.2. Strengthening the network of AMs: quality-oriented expansion

A key priority in this area of the Organization is to ensure a **high-quality membership**, reflected in a network of trustworthy and active Affiliate Members who are fully committed to UN Tourism's values and demonstrate the capacity to contribute to the fulfilment of its mission. Achieving this objective requires a rigorous evaluation and admission procedure, designed to ensure that only partners with the necessary expertise, motivation, commitment, and ability to bring value to the Organization are admitted as new Affiliate Members.

Significant progress has been made in enhancing the rigor of the admission process, notably with the introduction of an **application fee** effective 1 January 2026. This measure reinforces the quality filters necessary for the selective incorporation of new Affiliate Members while helping offset the costs associated with the eligibility verification process. The fee is also intended to cover both the direct costs of the admission procedure and indirect considerations, including reputational aspects.

This measure was approved by the 123rd Executive Council and incorporated into the Charter of Affiliate Membership.

The **strengthened admission procedure** has resulted in the approval of only 6 new Affiliate Members from the 51st CME, selected from a total of approximately 27 expressions of interest/applications. This means that **only 22% of applicants successfully passed the quality filters**, demonstrating their capacity to add value to the Organization.

As a result, the Middle East currently counts 53 affiliated entities, representing 10% of the total Affiliate Membership.

Improved **retention and membership stability** have also been observed. The enhancements in services, facilities, and engagement opportunities offered to Affiliate Members have contributed to a significant reduction in the number of members leaving due to arrears, **from 97 AMs in 2022 to 18 AMs in 2025**.

This strong downward trend demonstrates a positive trajectory in compliance, commitment, and member satisfaction, validating the effectiveness of the Organization's retention strategy.

3. Enhanced collaboration with the Board of Affiliate Members

From the institutional perspective, it is also worth underlining the crucial role of the collaboration with the Board of the Affiliate Members.

The 2022-2025 mandate was the first four-year mandate for the Board of Affiliate Members in the history of the Organization, a change intended to strengthen its institutional stability and to align the Board's mandate with that of the Secretary-General.

AM-PPC continued to support the Board of Affiliate Members in the organization of all their meetings and demarches and to have a permanent and smooth collaboration in all the important issues on the agenda.

- **62nd Meeting of the Board of AMs** (*Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, November 2025*), focused on:
 - Election of the authorities of the Board: Chair and 2 Vice-Chairs
 - Handover of the certificates to the Affiliate Members Board
 - Announcement of the date of the 63rd Meeting of the Affiliate Members Board

- **63rd Meeting of the Board of AMs** (*Madrid, Spain, January 2026*), focused on:
 - Update on key topics regarding the activities of the AM Board
 - Increasing the value of the Affiliate Membership: engagement of AMs in the elaboration of the UN Tourism's Barometer
 - Participation of the AM Board representatives in the 2026 Statutory Meetings
 - Innovative approaches included in the Programme of Work 2026-2027

- AM-PPC encouraged and supported the participation of the institutional representative of the AMs, designated by the Chair of the Board, in all UN Tourism's Statutory meetings celebrated lately (Executive Councils and Regional Commissions).

- Also, UN Tourism created all the necessary facilities for a permanent dialogue and reinforcement of the **collaboration between the Board of Affiliate Members** and the **Committee on Matters Related to the Affiliate Membership (CMAM)**, the statutory body responsible for evaluating applications and providing oversight, the region being represented by **Jordan**. This cooperation reinforces:
 - better alignment with UN Tourism's strategic priorities
 - fair and transparent admission processes
 - adherence to standards

The Chair of the Board participated in the meetings of the CMAM held in the framework of the last two Executive Councils. This engagement served as a crucial step in fostering dialogue and reinforcing our shared commitment to greater collaboration and integration within UN Tourism.

4. Elections for the 2026–2029 Board of Affiliate Members

Affiliate Members have elected the members of the new Board for the 2026–2029 term. Preparations for the election took place between January and September 2025 and the elections were held between 1 and 22 October 2025 on a dedicated, secure online platform.

Among the 23 Board Members, **Red Sea Global and Saudi Tourism Authority** represent the AMs from the Middle East.

At the 62nd meeting of the Board, held on November 2025, the members of the Board elected NECSTouR as its Chair, **Saudi Tourism Authority as its First Vice-Chair** and Cámara Argentina de Turismo as its Second Vice-Chair.

The election process demonstrated the Organization’s commitment to participatory governance and institutional legitimacy, as well as the increasing interest of the Affiliate Members to participate in the governance of the network, taking into consideration the consistent number of candidatures registered: 56. Also it is worth noting that 64% of eligible voting members cast their ballots, which marked an important increase in the participation, compared to the previous elections for the Board, celebrated in 2021.

5. **Affiliate Members and Public-Private Collaboration – Programme of Work 2026–2027**

As UN Tourism enters a new programmatic biennium, the Affiliate Members and Public-Private Collaboration Department (AM-PPC) elaborated its **Programme of Work 2026–2027**, conceived to operate in full alignment with the Organization’s **General Programme of Work 2026–2027**.

These two strategic instruments are distinct yet complementary:

- The **General Programme of Work of the Organization**, developed in consultation with Member States, outlines the Organization’s institutional priorities and global strategic direction.
- The **Affiliate Members Programme of Work** translates those priorities into concrete initiatives, partnerships, and knowledge products driven by Affiliate Members. To ensure meaningful participation and greater alignment, UN Tourism has launched an open Call for Proposals, inviting Affiliate Members to submit project ideas and activities that contribute to the delivery of the Organization’s agenda. This process aims to enhance engagement, foster integration into UN Tourism’s workstreams, and enable Affiliate Members to fully benefit from their membership through increased visibility, collaboration, and impact. Among the proposals received from the Affiliate Members from the region stand out the following:
 - The Aseer Development Authority is planning to host *“The Aseer Tourism Townhall”* to discuss the region’s tourism development and investment opportunities.
 - Inaar Consultancy is actively developing the *“Narrative-Driven Tourism Development Programme”*, an initiative designed to promote cultural identity, sustainability, and innovation across the tourism sector.
 - GID Global Media Production is preparing to launch a monthly podcast series *titled “Blazing Trails & Tales.”* This engaging podcast will combine storytelling, interviews, and destination features to promote global tourism and sustainability.

Looking ahead, the Affiliate Members network is expected to play a key role in advancing the Organization’s strategic objectives, particularly through contributions in thematic areas received through the Call for Proposal. At the same time, the variety of solid proposals received allowed us to enrich our collaborative portfolio with new innovative partnership formats, such as the new framework for collaboration and partnerships, called *“Affiliate Members-Driven Services for UN Tourism”*, designed by AM-PPC as a platform for structured opportunities for Affiliate Members to support the Organization and its Member States

with innovative products, tools and specialized services – such as IT applications, workshops and other training formats or specific research and to make them available for UN Tourism and its Member States.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

The UN Tourism Affiliate Membership continues to play a pivotal role in advancing innovation, dialogue, and sustainable development across the global tourism sector.

In The Middle East, progress has been particularly significant—both in terms of membership growth and quality and thematic contributions to the global agenda.

Looking ahead, the focus will remain on:

- Expanding and strengthening the network with high value partners.
- Fostering active participation in UN Tourism programmes and events.
- Supporting the new Board of Affiliate Members as a strong and representative body.
- Ensuring continuous alignment with the values and goals of the Organization.

Through continued cooperation between Member States and Affiliate Members, the region is well-positioned to further consolidate its leadership role in shaping the future of global tourism.