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# 13 The Return of the 'Idea of Iran' (2005-2015)

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## Introduction

This chapter examines the link between domestic and international political change upon tourism in Iran, with a specific focus on the period between 2005 and 2015. While existing scholarship generally attests to such a link in an international context, the discussion in this chapter focuses on illustrating the specifics of the Iranian case, juxtaposing movements in tourism with political developments in the country; developments with inextricable economic and social effects. We begin with a brief reference to the salient points made by recent scholars of the tourism-politics relationship before providing an overview of the relationship between modes of tourism and Iran's changing political climate. Drawing on the presentation and analysis of recently collected data from within Iran, the chapter then specifically focuses on the continuities and changes that have taken place with the change of administrations since 2005 under the leadership of two presidents: Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and Rouhani (2013-present). The chapter's analysis relies mainly on official government sources, including data gathered from policy statements, development plans, and archives. The authors recognise that the sources and especially statistical sources related to tourism in Iran may contain some contradictions and inconsistencies as is acknowledged even within the Iranian media (Hamshahri Online, 2016). However, in relation to the focus of this paper, which is tracing the interrelationships between tourism and political change, the impact of such potential biases are tolerable.

Existing scholarship has shown a close correlation between tourism and both domestic and international politics (Butler and Suntikul, 2010). Three major points in relation to the socio-political change and tourism in a specific destination are worthy of consideration: the type of political establishment (e.g. sultanate or parliamentary democracy), political instability and, or violence, and the political rhetoric within the destination. The type of the political establishment influences the influx of tourism, for example, autocratic regimes are likely to impose more constraints on travel (Neumayer 2004: 278). In a longitudinal study of 110 countries between 1995-2012, Saha *et al.* (2016: 2) suggest that both civil liberties, pertaining to tourists' comfort, safety and the rule of law, and economic freedom, pertaining to the availability of various services, are among the factors affecting inbound tourism. In a global study, Neumayer (2004) illustrates that political violence leaves measurable adverse effect on tourism in the long term and harms the economy. On the

other hand, while one-off instances of political violence reduce tourism flows, it is (especially long term) political instabilities that leave a lasting negative effect (Saha and Yap, 2014). Similarly, the dominant mood and political rhetoric in a country can adversely affect inbound tourism. For example, the rise of the right-wing anti-Asian One Nation party in Australia (1998) – whose leader said Asians ‘swamped’ Australia – adversely impacted tourism to Australia from Asia (Litvin 2016: 131). While ‘Hansonism’ was a phenomenon of domestic politics, it impacted regional tourists who felt they may become the target of xenophobic sentiments in Australia. Similarly, research shows that regional instability and political violence in neighbouring countries has a short term spill over effect which adversely affect prospects of tourism in a given country (Neumayer, 2004: 278). As the literature summarised above suggests, the intimate relationship between tourism and politics operates across interconnected scales from local to international.

All of these are relevant to Iran, which at various points in its recent history has gone through regime change, political instabilities and international conflict, as well as being located in a region of conflict, and at times factions within the state have assumed anti-West rhetoric in their political discourse. Furthermore, globally, the tourism sector is also influenced by economic volatilities as well as political instabilities. Tourism is a significant source of revenue and an important sector of the global economy. According to the WTTC, the travel and tourism contribution to the world economy stood at 9.8% of GDP (total contribution) and supported nearly 107.8 million jobs (direct employment), which is 3.6% of total employment during 2015 (Turner, 2016). As a sector, it would be all the more important for a country such as Iran where the economy is dominated by a single resource commodity, oil.

At present, according to official sources, tourism revenue in Iran amounts to US\$6-6.5 billion (0.5% of world’s tourism revenue). It is planned to increase this amount to 3%, therefore the budget of the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO) was increased by 44% in 2016-17 to nearly 1.13 thousand billion Iranian Rials (US\$ 32 million). Cultural heritage is still the focus for Rouhani’s administration, tourism took the second highest share of this budget, and handicrafts the least (Entekhab online, 2015).

## **An overview of the terrain of tourism in Iran from before 1979 to 2005**

Strengthening inbound tourism and its role as an economic and cultural pursuit has been a common goal of various state systems and administrations in modern Iran. This is true of both the Pahlavi Monarchy (1925-1979) as well as its successor state system, the Islamic Republic (1980-present). Since 1962 when the first Development Plan was put together in Iran, consecutive Development Plans included specific targets for tourism. In the fifth Pahlavi Development Plan (1973-1979) the tourism budget nearly doubled comparing to the Fourth Plan (from 3.6 billion Rials to 8.9 billion Rials). The Fifth Plan focussed on promoting Iran’s tourism in summer as well as winter activities, religious, and cultural tourism. This focus succeeded in

increasing foreign tourists' visit duration of stay from 13 nights in 1967 to 19 nights in 1973 (Javadi 2013, 48–52).

Part of the cultural agenda of the Pahlavi dynasty was the glorification of Iranian history and civilization, a position that they saw as politically advantageous (Ansari, 2014, 2012). While embracing the Islamic period in Iranian history, the monarchy also celebrated pre-Islamic heritage which it saw as a point of differentiation with other Muslim nations (Moftakhari, 2013). The emphasis was on historical continuity before and after Islam and to suggest that the Islamic period of Iran and perhaps Islamic civilization at large relied heavily on pre-Islamic Iran (Baum and O'Gorman, 2010; Shariati, 1982).

The (Islamic) Revolution of February 1979 resulted in a dramatic change in the political system, from monarchy to an Islamic Republic. The revolutionary turmoil caused a sharp decline in tourism activities as Figure 13.1 indicates, although the data records only 'arrivals', which may include both tourists and ex-pat Iranians. This was exacerbated by difficulties in international relations caused in part by ideological directions of revolutionary factions – causing crises such as the American hostage taking (4 November 1979) leading to the imposition of sanctions by the US (Iran Primer, 2010; Laub, 2015) and in part by regional crises including the advent of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989).

During this period, the dominant political discourse was anti-western and specifically anti-American, and there was a shift in the focus of tourism which promoted officially-endorsed Islamic values over and above other historic (and pre-Islamic) heritage tourism. The combination of these factors arguably deterred wealthier, western tourists from visiting Iran. Therefore, we can speculate that in this period the small number of inbound tourists were mainly of non-western origin. While before the Revolution the Iranian tourism industry mainly targeted American and European nations, after this, Iran targeted Muslim nations which did not usually enjoy high travel expenditures (Javadi, 2013). This was also aligned with the revolutionary state's desire to play a prominent cultural and political role in the Middle East region, based on its proclaimed ambition of leading the Islamic world (Mahmoudi and Latifof, 2015). The overarching concern was therefore to promote the Islamic values of the revolution and to 'export' revolution to neighbouring countries (Javani, 2014).

The ending of the Iran-Iraq (1988) war and the passing of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, at the end of 1980s (3 June 1989) also ushered in a new chapter in the history of the Revolution as plans for a degree of economic liberalisation were devised by the government. The first Development Plan after the Revolution, was produced in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war in 1991, during the presidency of Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (2 terms, 1989–1997). It covered partly retrospectively the period between 1989 and 1994 and for the first time after the Revolution, it reflected an emphasis on tourism in official policy. This attention to tourism would continue in subsequent Five-Yearly Development Plans as the country aimed to diversify its economy and recognised the value of tourism as an economic sector. Although, in the immediate aftermath of the war, there was a specific focus on post-war protection and preservation of heritage in general and