

TOURISM IN IRAN: FROM PILGRIMAGE TO LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Iran is a country very rich in natural resources and major infrastructure predominantly Shiite religious, which attracts many pilgrims, especially at the international level as well as nationally. The contribution in addition to describing the phenomenon of tourism - religious in this country, it examines the effects of localized mainly in the city of Mashhad. In this urban area, the religious phenomenon is mixed with the tourist so that the current size of the city is due to the pilgrimage of the devout Shiites. The explosion of this type of tourism is believed to be derived from two main factors: the first one after the various diasporas of the Iranians, the Shia religion has spread throughout the Middle East and the Mashhad city, being close to the border with Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, has become the center of the Shiite pilgrimage for all of these areas, the second is derived from the increased role of religion in social and economic dynamics, such as to result in a purely locational extending the area of the Mosque. The contribution will analyze the phenomenon of tourism in relation to urban sprawl taking as a model the functionalist analysis.

1. The role of tourism in the economy in Iran

In Iran, international tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon, because in the past the country has been affected much by the restrictions and economic sanctions, as well as from a state of relative safety, losing a lot of attraction in terms of tourism. Is generally known in the literature as the tourists look calm, safety and comfort, all the requirements that in this last period of history are present in Iran, thanks to its climate of stability, which is emerging. For this reason, according to the World Tourism Organization, the Persian country has growth prospects in terms of tourism more than the other countries where tourism is a phenomenon more consolidated, such as Europe. The study of international tourism in Iran, therefore, is very interesting from an economic and social and its impacts are yet to be explored for the role of the ancient Shiite.

Although Iran is only a few decades become an international tourist destination tourism in Iran has been present for many years, even for the ancient and traditional religious customs practiced by the Iranians themselves, developing a large flow of domestic tourism. Tourism today, therefore, is based on the tourist already very consistent and directed mostly to domestic tourism. The influx of international tourists has not found unprepared this country, which immediately started a process

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of modernization and expansion of existing facilities to accommodate the new tourists. For several years, in fact, international tourism is growing not only from neighboring countries such as Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also from Asia, America and Europe. International tourists, as well as enjoy the many natural resources, are encouraged to book a holiday in Iran following the collapse of the value of the local currency (the rial). The devaluation of the currency, in particular, has a strong influence on the purchasing power of tourists enticed to spend on local products, activate the tourist multiplier with a resulting increase in local value added.

YEAR	TOTAL	DEPARTURE DOMESTIC	INTERNATIONAL	TOTAL	ARRIVAL DOMESTIC	INTERNATIONAL
1381-2001	10159	8384	1775	10116	8384	1732
1382-2002	11110	8942	2168	11111	8942	2169
1383-2003	11761	9355	2406	11758	9355	2403
1384-2004	13091	10508	2583	13031	10508	2523
1385-2005	15286	12423	2862	15245	12423	2822

Tab.1 Departure and Arrivals in Iran (2001-2005)

Source: <http://wttc.org> (consulted on March 2014)



Fig.1: International Arrivals and Export in Iran

Fonte: WTTC, *Travel and Tourism -Economic Impact 2013 – Iran*, www.wttc.org (consulted on March 2014)

Figure 1 shows the increase of foreign tourists in recent years in correspondence with international politics more relaxed. From 2009 to 2013, foreign visitors have grown steadily surpassing 50 million (see tab.1).

From Figure 1 it is also clear that exports resulting from tourist spending accounts for about 3% of the total. This percentage is still considered very significant when you consider that about 80% of exports consists of energy materials and consequently affects greatly the tourism balance of payments total Iranians. This

significant share of exports also allows you to assume that the segment of foreign tourists who arrive in Iran have high spending power. With regard to the economic importance of tourism in Iran is worth pointing out that directly participates in the formation of GDP to 2% of the total, in a more or less constant over ten years (source: WTTC). Given that the GDP of Iran is a format for industry and 45% for a total of about 44% in services, according to the estimate of the Central Intelligence Agency - United States-in 2013, relies on the assumption that tourism can be certainly a very important economic sector for the purposes of an economic and social development of this country. This possibility is then supported by the investment of local capital which corresponds to approximately 3.5% of all the capital invested in the economy, although considering that a large part of the country's area with intensive use of natural

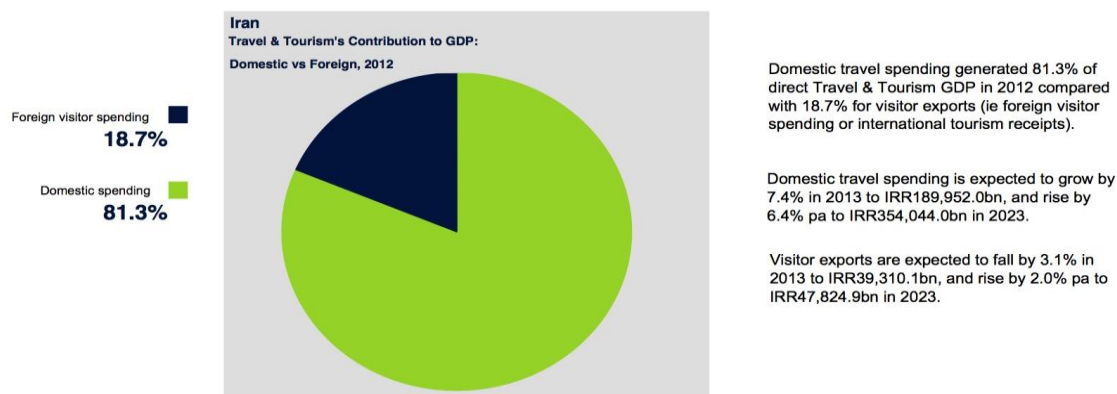


Fig.2: Domestic and Visitor Travel Spending and Travel and Tourism's Contribution of GDP

Source: <http://wttc.org> (consulted in March 2014)

Although not high, the investments in tourism are a sign of the development of tourism is very important for the country, being subject to economic sanctions, has great difficulty for exports and for the unstable exchange rates with a strong tendency to devaluation. Local investments, however, the isolation of balanced economic system. Despite the write-downs, the international political problems have hampered investment of foreign capital in the Persian territories and created the economic environment conducive to the process of economic restructuring within the country so that today the tourism system of Iran has reached that level of quality is not very far from European standards. The constraints have, in fact, gone a strong benefit to the local business that has benefited protective effect in order to invest in tourism. Iran has become, therefore, a tourist destination and there are many travel agencies that operate in full autonomy granting of visas for tourism. This possibility has benefited the influx of foreign tourists-especially from neighboring Arab countries, but there are European, Japanese and American - even if there are some limitation of social and cultural activities, such as the obligation for women to cover the head or the prohibition of taking alcohol. The presence of these limitations did not deter the influx of international tourists, which, however, are attracted by the cultural heritage of ancient Persia, as well as from the natural beauty of their region of Iran, as its varied landscape due to the presence of volcanic mountains, deserts, lakes and coastal regions bordering on both the Persian Gulf on the Caspian Sea. Increase

tourism is possible in the region has also been highlighted by the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who during his first press conference, he acknowledged the enhancement of the tourism sector a very important goal is to restore the national economy and also to offer a different image of the country . This finding is also derived from the government program that in 2005 gave birth to the rural tourism development program with templates Resorts, which encouraged the development of tourism in rural areas allowing an opening of the local population to tourists (Pourtaheri M., Rahmani K. & H. Ahmadi, 2012, page 123). While tourism in Iran has meant economic benefits, "as potential sources of employment, as well as means to modernize and conform to the international community. On the other hand, there are Those Who Consider tourism as a means of globalization and a threat to Islamic values and norms. "

The possibility of the disintegration of the social and ethical Persian derived from tourism, in addition, has also been suggested by a number of politicians who supported the propaganda carried out by American and European mass media showing the image of a very traditional and Iran, creating a reluctance to the tourist to travel to these places. On the contrary, today this country has had the ability to enhance its heritage and its traditions, making levers on their own resources and communicating a new image both within the country and outside of a region not only self-referential, but also capable to communicate with the outside world.

2. The religious tourism and pilgrimage in Shiism

The Shiites as all Muslims believe in the five pillars of Islam: profession of faith, daily prayers, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage.

The latter is a ritual recommended in the Qur'an not only to Medina, but also where are buried the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth Imam. Since a fundamental aspect of religious life, "every pilgrimage has its own elaborate ritual consists of specific prayers and devotions" (Vanzan, p.36.) and the Iranians in order to achieve this dictates of religion, they have developed a great devotion to sanctuaries within their own country, also because of the geopolitical restrictions.

It should be emphasized that, despite the gender differences that underlie the religion of Islam, the pilgrimage is practiced by Shia Muslims - and not only - since ancient times and can travel for such purposes both men and women, without distinction, even if there are specific areas in the sanctuary to pray. It can be argued, therefore, that Islam is not fundamentally opposed to the practice of tourism, which, however, by its nature leads to a close relationship with the West, and ultimately with modernity, much criticized by fundamentalist Muslims.

Visits to sanctuaries, however, are a form of pilgrimage volunteer who exemplifies spatially unique traditions of Islamic populations (Abdekhodaei, 2003, p.214).

"According to the sacred text of the Qur'an, Muslims should travel to fully appreciate the beauty of God's world and also visit their friends and relatives." For this reason, the Muslims, who welcome the pilgrims in their city, have the responsibility of providing hospitality to visitors who, according to Islamic law, enjoy the rights of citizens (Okhovat, 2010).

The pilgrimage is, in fact, a form of religious tourism in the sense that the pilgrim is a person who travels only to go and pray at the shrine to ask for leniency and mercy, as opposed to the religious tourist is any visitor that the religious purpose also adds leisure activities and cultural entertainment and social choice or otherwise the holiday is to relax, go somewhere else and not just to achieve a certain holy place.

As for the only pilgrimage in Iran is estimated that from 1978 to 2011 there was a sharp increase from 6.29 million as of pilgrims in 1978, it has come to 27 million pilgrims in 2011. Nowadays there are more than 1100 Shiite shrines, but not all have the same importance and consequently not all of these sanctuaries accommodate an equal number of faithful. The most visited shrines in Iran - Ziyarat - housing the tombs of the eighth Imam in Mashhad and his sister Fatima in Qom, the other shrines - Imamzade, which commemorate descendants of Imam - they do not receive many pilgrims as it is of minor importance in terms of faith, whether they are located in the desert or in very remote places and their location discourages the pilgrimage.

1978	1983	1986	2000	2006	2011
6,29 ml.	6,44 ml.	9,74ml.	16 ml.	20 ml.	27 ml.

Tab.2: Pilgrims in Iran (Ml.)

Source: Alizadeh, 2011

The Shiite pilgrims visit these sites because they believe that the imams and their relatives have the power to intercede with God so that they can fulfill their requests.

The increase of the practice of pilgrimage is certainly due to the geopolitical situation has lived in Iran and the countries bordering it. To this end it is useful to consider that Shi'ism is a religion widespread in this region, so that it extends from the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea forming the cd. "Shia crescent". The countries included in this half moon, they have many similarities not only from a purely geographical point, as neighbors, but also for domestic politics and international that are very complex, which have facilitated the spread of Shiism, largely for the migration of the population from one country to another. The expansion of Shiism, like religion, has helped to expand the phenomenon of pilgrimage in areas, such as Iran, there were not civil wars in progress. Consequently, the pilgrims coming from Iraq or Afghanistan or Pakistan as preferred choice for the pilgrimage places Iranians, being the geographical proximity a very important element for the choice of destination.

From a research between 2006 and 2007, the authors (Zamani - Farahani and Musa, 2008) revealed that:

1 - Muslims have no interest in religion of a tourist and are interested in spreading the Islamic religion among tourists.

2 - Government officials warn residents from the adverse effects socio - cultural aspects of Western-style international tourism, explaining their opposition to it

3 - A number of luxury hotel managers are reluctant to accommodate large parties of Muslim family because of past experiences of misconduct and vandalism.

4 - Some of the less affluent Muslim travelers and pilgrims resort to begging to cover the cost of their trip.

These considerations allow us to hypothesize that foreign tourists if they profess other religions or are those the do-it-yourself, they are not well received as these tourists are geared to relate to the residents Iranian more for cultural aspects than for strictly religious. This reluctance to international tourism can also be considered, as the research shows, a protection factor values and Islamic culture itself because the relationship with the tourists can threaten the welfare state and pose a danger to the status quo, loosening the dependence against the government. It can be assumed, therefore, that they are only Shiite pilgrims to be greeted with much enthusiasm and hosted by the resident community.

From the considerations that emerged in the research proposal, we can also infer that in addition to the pilgrimage to the holy places are also held other ceremonies, rituals and events of all kinds, increasing quality tourism. This level of quality, however, it seems expire when to make the practice of religious tourism are large families, coming together on these occasions and vacation time freed from other occupations, family reunion and then think of the event rather than the mundane religious.

In contrast to this type of religious tourists, the research shows that the true pilgrim or traveling to the holy places with a particular religious sentiment, it is well received in these places so that those who have no economic means such practice experience. In fact in many of the Shiite shrines are distributed free meals.

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The development of religious tourism and pilgrimage shrines that of the Iranians is considered positive for the economic and social effects present and expected, even given the increase in international tourism that will expand the local value added. If, in fact, "Tourist sites are shown to have Gained sacredness, travel to them exhibiting the qualities of pilgrimage (Cohen, 1992), while actual pilgrimage venues display some of the trappings of the tourism industry in order to obscure the boundaries between them." (Ghadami, 2012, p. 11206)

3. Mashhad: the Holy City, a model of religious tourism

Between the most important Iran places both spiritually and touristically, Mashhad plays a very special role, being called the "Holy City" of the Shiites. Geographically Mashhad is one of the most populous cities in Iran and is located in the north-east, very near the border between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, more than 900 m above the sea. Its geographical position is very important for the development of urban functions become time to rank high in strengthening the foundations of a hierarchical organization that is expressed in the centrality of Mashhad compared to the whole region below the Khorasan. Mashhad, in fact, founded as a religious center, had a booming thanks to the trade, benefiting from the role of Khorasan, a crossroads for the Silk Road. Mashhad thus reflects the

complexity of the Iranian world, that despite the many economic and social difficulties, it is now an interesting model of religious tourism destination. Attracting nearly 20 million pilgrims every year - the limits of the carrying capacity of tourism, with a rate equal 1/1, for every resident there is at least a tourist - this holy city has considerably altered his original armor for 'intense urban dynamism that has affected.

Its function polarizing increased in recent years, it has been determined both by its high mobility derived from human and religious tourism flows, both from the gradual extension of the urbanized area that has contributed to accommodate continuously Shiites. The settlement pattern of Mashhad is, therefore, deeply unbalanced in favor of the city center, which continues to show significant flows and reflects the gradual urbanization of peripheral areas. The crown peri-urban areas, widespread today, foreshadows a real process of metropolization the city of Mashhad, with consequent negative and positive effects and confirming itself as "the focal point of modernity" (Faccioli, 2009, p. 35). The concentrated negative externalities such as congestion and pollution, however, are offset by positive economic impact, contributing to tourism and the service sector as a whole in 2010 at the local added value to 7.16 million dollars, 52.33% of entire value added of the local economy (source: <http://en.mashhad.ir/index.php>). The service sector, however, attributes an important role "the city within specific territorial vocations" (Fuschi, page 76) due to the functional organization of the urban.

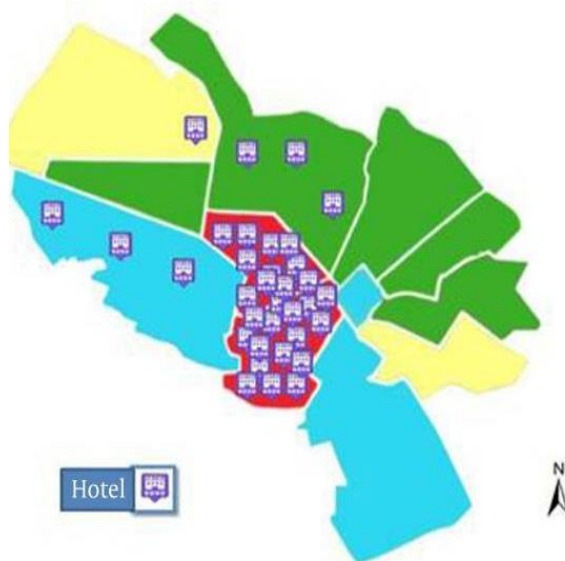


Fig. 3: Distribution of Hotels in Mashhad City

Source: Ghezeldasht S .A., Miri R, Hedayatimoghadam M, Shamsian A, Bidkhorri H, Fathimoghadam F, Rezaee SA, (2013).

The polarization of Mashhad has its roots from the sanctuary or better by the great religious building of the city center. The sanctuary, in fact, becomes only the initial part of the massive construction and infrastructure, which occurred later. The area includes: the shrine of Imam Reza, the burial chamber, the "courtyard", the series of courtyard, well 9, where pilgrims gather after the visit to the shrine and serve as

gathering places for a series of ceremonies and religious programs, other smaller shrines, religious centers research, a university studies Shiites and finally a library. E 'for this reason, perhaps, that the role of the sanctuary has grown from a religious and social, polarizing all the more important urban functions and to rank higher, constituting also the center of Shi'ite religious justice and culture. If the sanctuary is proposed, despite the successive renovations and expansions, as a single center, the mirror and the identity of the Shia Muslim architecture, the urban system is characterized by the fracture of Mashhad, represented in particular by the infrastructure of the suburbs, and multiform approved the city middle East.

Table 3: Hotel accommodation facilities, capacity per month and occupation percentage by star

stars	Number of hotels	Number of rooms	Number of beds	Capacity per month		Occupation percentage	
				Rooms	beds	rooms	beds
Total	113	8651	24591	259530	737730	292	300
5 star	3	617	1630	18510	48900	58	59
4 star	10	1155	3438	34650	103140	56	58
3star	34	3551	10082	106530	302460	63	65
2 star	29	1445	3980	43350	119400	55	57
1star	37	1883	5461	56490	163820	60	61

Source: (www.cho-to-khr.ir), 2010

Tab 3: Hotel Accomodation Facility, Capacity per Month and Occupation Percentage by Star Source: [ww.cho-to-khr.ir](http://www.cho-to-khr.ir)

The urban layout is, therefore, strongly characterized by this complex structure in which are added a large number of hotels. These are part of the tourist offer of the city with very wide ranging types and quality. While in the suburbs there is a great deal of room for the less affluent Persian pilgrims, the city center there are many hotels of diverse levels. In particular, high-quality hotels are to the immediate vicinity of the sanctuary, and there are 3 five-star and 10 four-star hotel with over 100 rooms. The rate of employment among all 5-star hotels is 58% in 2010 and is very high if we consider that the number of rooms is about 600 units, as opposed to the 2 star hotel with about 1,400 rooms has an occupancy of 55% , again in 2010 (www.cho-to-khr.ir - consulted on March 2014). Tourists who prefer five-star hotels leave to assume that these pilgrims and / or religious have a relatively high spending power. we can also assume that it is this type of tourist that in the past visited the holy places, as these hotels concentrated in the city center where the building is older. This consideration allows a further study with regard to tourism and the pilgrimage to Mashhad.

In this progressive city, it is increasingly the _ distinction between religious pilgrim from the tourist who, after visiting the holy places seeking the 'entertainment to occupy your free time. To meet the needs of the latter, in Mashhad have sprung up over the great bazaar of souvenir, _ large shopping malls, theme parks and natural areas where you can enjoy the beauty of the environment. (http://en.mashhad.ir/portal_content/778461-Recreational-Centers-Parks.html - consulted on March 2014). The valorization of natural resources made with parks, however, has amplified the tourist potential of Mashhad, who besides being a holy city has become a real tourist destination, so that websites appear in search engines especially hotels and four five star hotels. Its obvious choice on the part of

international tourists choose quality hotels, allow us to hypothesize that there is still much attention to the international tourist by government agencies. The selection of international tourists and the choice is determined by the origin of these tourists, who are most of the neighboring areas and then with many complex political situations in their countries.

In Mashhad religious tourism has generated high value-added, which allowed a significant expansion of the service sector, especially compared to other Iranian cities. The attraction of Mashhad for all walks of life dedicated to religious tourism has led to a side investment to improve facilities satisfying the most demanding application, that spending on local goods has contributed to the achievement of certain economic policy objectives such as employment, the increase in per capita income and improvement of infrastructure; on the other hand, the development of many accommodation facilities on the outskirts of the city for pilgrims issued in part both the benefits and costs of tourism for the city. This policy was essential for the large influx of tourists / pilgrims, who host the homes of citizens posed problems with regard to public health, safety and hygiene. The government has encouraged Mashhad, therefore, not only the construction of budget accommodation and residential centers, but also the use of religious structures such as mosques or empty school building, during the holiday season, to have a social control over the pilgrims. The policy of the government has expanded the tourist offer and today approximately 600,000 pilgrims every day can be hosted in the city. Being the very high cost of this policy, the government has promoted partnerships with the private sector by giving some incentives, such as tax relief on annual fees and the granting of loans at low rate of interest, etc. .. In recent years, however, increased the number of pilgrims at exponential ways, and many of them are still hosted in the homes of private citizens. In the hours of meals, in addition, as it is in use among the Muslims, in the sanctuary you can receive free food to eat.

4. Conclusions

Iran is certainly a very complex country, but with great vitality. Despite the problems and sanctions, is a country that has had the strength to build a very stable local economy. As we tried to describe, however, Shiism has contributed to the dynamism of this country, because this religion is characterized by its penetration into the social and political fabric of the country. Religion, being, therefore, the center of the life of this country, has also led to a great expansion of tourism. The attractiveness of Iran, however, is not only related to religion, but also to its history, its geographical position, its natural, cultural and environmental factors that have made it a popular destination above all by tourists from neighboring countries. This contribution has researched those holy places other than the Christian culture, allows us to consider those who practice a different religious tourism and the pilgrimage. First we must point out that the one does not exclude the other in any kind of religion and territories. There are two types of tourists who live in the same territory with two different needs. The tourist has different and complex needs where the religious sphere is intertwined with that of recreation, while the pilgrim is solely devoted to prayer. The first form of tourism, in terms of purely economic, it is very important as it is the engine of the economy, the leverage for developing the local economy, income and its redistribution.

To this end, the changes can not be unspoken, who insist in urban and territorial systems as a result of the expansion of the demand for religious tourism. These changes are positive on the one hand for the exploitation of resources, on the other hand generate conflicts and conflicts in the use of factors of production, by configuring the formation of new complex balances. It is assumed for this reason, the need in these places of _ tourism and leisure expand services to reach the tourist demand higher spending power. The influx of this type of tourists, however, should not distract the atmosphere of prayer and silence their pilgrim. For this reason it is necessary, as the model Mashhad has proposed that the activities of rest and entertainment are located outside of the authority of the prayer. The proposed case study can be a first step on religious tourism _ we can assume that new avenues of research to explore how comparatively economically and spatially dynamic religious tourism representatives in places of Christian faith and experience the social and economic impact on both the territorial religious tourism pilgrimage.

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