Iran or Persia: What's in a name, the decline and fall of a tourism industry?

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Iran is a combination of Persia and Islam, it is a complicated, often confused, if not diametrically opposed mix of two ideologies; as a country it is complex and unpredictable but also, from a tourism perspective, unrivalled in the cultural attributes that it can offer to the more intrepid traveller. Historically, modern Iran has its roots in ancient Persia and therefore it is unsurprising that the contemporary nation attempts to trace its cultural heritage back for at least 5,000 years. Hegel considered the ancient Persians to be the first historic people:

> "In Persia first arises that light which shines itself and illuminates what is around...The principle of development begins with the history of Persia; this constitutes therefore the beginning of history" (Hegel, 1857, p. 147).

However, Hegel's historicism is questionable on two grounds. Firstly, that *Persia* was identifiable. As Garthwaite has commented,

> "'Persia' is not easily located with any geographic specificity, nor can its people, the Persians, be easily categorized. In the end Persia and the Persians are as much metaphysical notions as a place or a people." (Garthwaite, 2007, p. 1)

Indeed, despite the long antecedence of civilisation in the area, until the late sixth century BC, there are no known historical materials that are written by Persians identifying themselves as Persian. Secondly, Hegel's historicism is questionable because modern Iran is not *one* people in terms of customs, but a multinational and multicultural Asian state, comprising groups that on the one hand are Iranian in an ethno-linguistic sense (Persian – Tajik, Kurdish, Balochi), and on the other, of other people who are not, notably Turkish (Azerbaijani, Turkmen, Qashqai) and Arabic. As Curatola and Scarcia (2004, p. 11) have commented, "Numerous ethnic groups now inhabit Iran, within the framework of a morphologically unequal territory, in an original, somewhat culturally cohesive mosaic". The contribution of Persian culture has been fundamental for the development of Iranian civilisation, but has also had an impact far wider than the area inhabited by ethnic Iranians or the present political boundaries of Iran. The mosaic of contemporary Iran has also felt the impact of conflicts in neighbouring state with the consequence that, over the pats twenty years, the country

has hosted the largest refugee population in the world, primarily rooted in the influx of over 2.6 million Afghans following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and including 1.2 million Iraqis who left Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and the 1990-1991 Gulf War. The impact of these incomers, both temporary and long-term, has been felt in economic but also cultural terms.

Iran became the officially universal title for the country in 1935 when the Shah decreed that it was to be used on all international correspondence and official documents. In the English-speaking West, Iran had been traditionally known as Persia. Indeed, the name *Persia* commonly conjures up quite different images to the name *Iran*. Under the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran was seen as the playground of the European rich, famed for a liberal ideology, an excellent climate and wonderful natural resources (Pahlavi, 1980). Travel and tourism to Iran is not just a 20th Century concept, there are early 17th Century accounts of intrepid travellers. Sir Anthony Sherley, for example, was received by the Shah, Abbas the Great, who made him a Mirza, or prince, and granted certain trading and other rights to all Christian merchants (Sherley, 1613). John Cartwright recorded details about the buildings of Esfahan and Persepolis and wrote extensively about the nature of the Persian peoples (Cartwright, 1611). By the 19th Century Iran was still seen as an exotic destination for the adventurer and explorer, as the Journal of the Royal Geographical Society attests. There are a number of papers presenting travellers accounts including: Biddulph (1891); Gibbons (1841); Goldsmid (1890).

Iran is incredibly rich in cultural and heritage resources and has in total eight listed world heritage sites, but an additional 49 on the UNESCO tentative list (UNESCO, 2009). Of the eight listed sites four are ancient historical sites: Bisotun, Pasargadae, Persepolis and Tchogha Zanbil (Table 1). The other listed sites are either historical towns or religious sites. The profile of the tentative list is very different. Of the 49 sites 15 are historic towns, nine are historical landscapes and eight are natural landscapes. In addition, built heritage is further emphasised with six religious sites, one historical village, one garden, two bazaars and two military sites. Only four of the 49 sites are ancient historical sites and one is a prehistoric site. The emphasis of the tentative list is clearly towards more recent historical sites than is the existing world heritage list for Iran. There is a clear emphasis on the Islamic Period in the tentative list, with great attention to the cultural evolution of Iran as an artisan production and trading nation. Such sites include Yazd, the Ghaznavi-Seljukian Axis, Uramanat, Masouleh and Siraf.

[Take in Table 1]

This inventory reflects both ancient and more modern facets of Iran's cultural heritage but provides the basis for cultural tourism visitation experiences that, potentially, can bet set alongside "leading brand" destinations such as Egypt, Greece, India, Italy and Turkey in terms of both the historical importance and their visual splendour. That modern Iran does not enjoy such status in tourism terms is the consequence of a number of factors but none stands out as strongly as the political

consequences of the country's recent history, a theme which forms the backbone of our discussions in this chapter.

The remainder of this chapter is in three sections based on key historical and political phases in the evolution of modern Iran: the Shahanshah and the Ayatollah, President Khatami and the Dialogue of Civilisations, and President Ahmadinejad and the rise of the neo-conservatives. Our purpose is demonstrate the relationship between the dramatically changing political tableaux of the country over the past 40 years, the challenges faced by a country at conflict within itself and with its neighbours and the development of a tourism destination on the basis of, primarily, natural and cultural resources.

The Shahanshah and the Ayatollah

In order to understand the shape of tourism in contemporary Iran, it is necessary to review the recent political history of the country and reflect upon how this history has shaped attitudes to modern tourism as well as the development of the sector alongside other economic priorities in the country. In 1925 General Reza Khan led a revolt and became the *Shahanshah* (king of kings), founding the country's final dynasty. The title *Shahanshah* evoked the ancient mystique of monarchy, the paramount ruler who had subdued other kings. This family, the Pahlavis created the bases of the modern-day Iranian nation-state, through nationalism, centralisation and modernisation (Savory 1992; Garthwaite 2007). In turn, the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini forced the last Shah into exile in January 1979 (Homan 1980) and the foundation of the contemporary Islamic Republic was speedily laid. Initially, the popular Revolution was more about economic rights and workers' democracy than it was about an Islamic revolution in terms of its values (Malm & Esmailian, 2007), but within two years of the revolution, theocratic values and behaviour were enforced on Iranians and visiting foreigners alike. Common interests found in opposing the Pahlavis collapsed once the last Shah was forced to leave Iran, and competing interest groups once again asserted their power against each other. As Savory (1992, p.256) notes in relation to the outcome,

> "One of the most striking features of the [Khomeini] regime has been its policy of attempting to destroy the distinctive Iranian culture …and to replace its symbols by Islamic ones. The monarchy has been replaced by the mosque as the cultural symbol of Iran."

The 1979 Revolution was a revolution of values. The replacement is reflected in how non-Islamic heritage has been regarded since the Revolution, in turn impacting on present day tourism development.

Tourism, heritage and politics became entwined in the Revolutionary process and not just after it. In 1971 the last Shah invited emissaries from about 70 countries to celebrate 2,500 years of the

monarchy and symbolically staged this extravaganza beside the ancient ruins of Persepolis. According to contemporary reports, the guests watched 6000 costumed marchers representing ten dynasties of Persian history pass in review, in a spectacular tent city that hosted kings, sheikhs and sultans and was billed as the greatest cultural gathering in history. The party provoked a backlash from the Shah's political opponents that eventually swelled into the movement that shaped the revolution. Less than a decade later the Islamic revolution lead by Ayatollah Khomeini forced the Shah into exile on January 16, 1979 (Homan, 1980). During the revolution, leading clerics called for the destruction of the tomb of Cyrus the Great and remains of Persepolis (Sciolino, 2000) and according to Molavi (2005, p. 14) a local Ayatollah came to Persepolis with 'a band of thugs' and gave an angry speech demanding that 'the faithful torch the silk-lined tent city and the grandstand that the Shah had built' but was driven off by stone-throwing local residents. However, the 65 hectare (160 acre) site, which featured 51 luxurious air-conditioned tents organised in the shape of a star, fell into ruin after the revolution.

The pre-revolutionary regime invested in more that this one event in the development of tourism in Iran. Politically, the regime created an environment within which visitors, particularly from the West, were welcomed to facilities and a level of comfort that was on par with the best in their home countries. Although Iran was recognised as a country with a predominantly Islamic ethos, from the international visitors' perspective, this was benign Islam tolerant and welcoming to outsiders, provided that they were willing to observe appropriate respect from local culture and beliefs. Investment in tourism infrastructure was in line with high end tourism destination image that the Shah's regime sought to cultivate. Thus, hotel investment was supported by management contracts with major international brands such as Hilton, Hyatt, Intercontinental and Sheraton and the aspirations of the national airline, Iran Air, were significantly greater than those of airlines from comparable developing economies in the region and elsewhere. In 1965, Iran Air took delivery of its first jet aircraft, the Boeing 727-100, followed by the Boeing 737-200 in 1971, the stretched Boeing 727-200 in 1974 and three variants of Boeing 747s (747-100, -200 and SP), starting in 1975. By the mid-1970s, Iran Air was serving a wide range of cities in Europe and there were over 30 flights per week to London alone. The pinnacle of this aspiration was announced in 1972.

> "A 'preliminary purchase agreement' was signed in Teheran last week between Iran Air and BAC for two Concordes, with "an intention to purchase a third," which is being retained on option at present. Iran Air chairman General Ali Mohammed Khademi and Sir Geoffrey Tuttle, vice-chairman of the BAC commercial aircraft division, signed the document, which corresponds to a letter of intent. The first Iran Air Concorde is scheduled to be delivered by the end of 1976 and the second by early 1977. The third, now on option, is earmarked for delivery in 1978. General Khademi says his airline is anticipating operation on Far East routes as well as some to the western hemisphere". (Flight International, 1972, p.482)

By the late 1970s, Iran Air was the fastest growing airline in the world and one of the most profitable. By 1976, Iran Air was ranked second only to Qantas, as the world's safest airline, having been accident free for at least ten consecutive years.

The impact of the Islamic revolution was immediate and dramatic for Iran Air as it was throughout the fledgling tourism sector. In the wake of the revolution in 1979, Iran Air began to reorganize its international operations, discontinuing service to a range of foreign destinations. Tehran was designated as the only official gateway to Iran, while Shiraz could be used as an alternate, only in case of operational requirements. All other cities in Iran lost their international status. Concorde orders were cancelled in April 1980, ironically making Iran Air the last airline to cancel such orders

With the revolution, there was the nationalisation of all foreign assets, seizure of all the wealth of the Shah's court including cinemas, factories and real estate in New York. These assets subsequently formed part of the *Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan*[1]. The *Bonyad* is a religious foundation, under the director control of the Supreme Leader, setup in the aftermath of the revolution. By 1989 it was the biggest holding company in the Middle East (Ehteshami, 1995). It consists of six different organizations each holding several related groups of companies as subsidiaries: Civil Development and Housing; Recreation and Tourism; Industries and Mines, Agriculture, and Transportation; and Commerce. The affiliated organizations managed about 400 companies and factories (Parsa, 1989). Within Iran, it was active in the most outstanding industrial and business sectors: Food and beverage, chemicals, cellulose items, metals, petrochemicals, construction materials, dams, lowers, civil development, farming, horticulture, tourism, transportation, five-star hotels, commercial services, financing, joint ventures, etc (Abrahamian, 1991). The workforce of Bonyad is estimated at 700,000 employees and their annual turnover seems to range from 2% to 10% of GDP(Maloney, 2000).

As part of the newly formed *Bonyad's* Recreation and Tourism organisation all the international hotel companies were taken over. In Tehran the Grand Hyatt became the Azadi (freedom), The Royal Tehran Hilton became the Esteghlal (independence) and the Intercontinental became the Laleh (tulip), in reference to mythical red flower that grows in the blood of the Shia martyrs. One former iconic international property, the Sheraton, was allocated to a hotel chain operated by Iran Air and re-branded as the Homa. Kentucky Fried Chicken was rebranded 'Our Fried Chicken,' Pepsi was 'Zam-Zam' and thus the *Bonyad* (a religious foundation) controlled the soft-drinks market, very lucrative in dry country, without rivals. Maloney (2000, p. 159) notes that in 1993 Coca-Cola, through franchisers, attempted to break into the market, the head of the *Bonyad* stated "God willing we will soon drive all foreign Coca-Cola plants out of Iran;" and, indeed, the Foundation for the Oppressed exiled Coca-Cola from their land!

From immediately after the revolution the number of international tourists fell from 680,000 in 1978 to a low of 9,300 in 1990 (ITTO, 2001). The Iran-Iraq War lasted from September of 1980 until August of 1988 and included religious schisms, border disputes, and political differences; conflicts

[1] *Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan* originally called *Bonyad-e Mostazafan* (foundation for the oppressed) referring those oppressed by the Shah and in 1989 *Janbazan* (those who sacrifice themselves) was added to the title referring to the martyrs of the Iran / Iraq war. In popular parlance is it still known as *Bonyad-e Mostazafan* or more commonly just *Bonyad* (the foundation).

ranged from centuries-old religious and ethnic disputes, and personal animosity between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. Primarily Iraq launched the war in an effort to consolidate its rising power in the Arab world and to replace Iran as the dominant Gulf state. At the end of the War the *Bonyad* was responsible for the decommissioned military personal, a considerable number of whom were found work in their hotels and resorts.

President Khatami and the Dialogue of Civilisations

In May 1997 Hojjatoleslam Muhammad Khatami's won an overwhelming victory against all odds and expectations and began a reformist movement. President Khatami unashamedly championed reform of the governing system in Iran, proposed comprehensive changes to the country's civil-state relations, and sought to make the Islamic system more in tune with the aspirations of the people (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007). Shortly after his election, in 1998, Khatami addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York to delineate his idea for a 'Dialogue of Civilisations' (Khatami, 2001), probably as a challenge to Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' (Huntington, 1998). His dialogue of civilisations had several goals: laying the ground for peaceful, constructive debate among nations; providing a context in which civilisations can learn from each other; replacing fear, blame, and prejudice with reason, fairness, and tolerance; and facilitating a dynamic exchange of experiences among culture, religions, and civilisations aimed at reform and amelioration.

As part of this dialogue there was a clear plan to increase and enhance hospitality and tourism through a ground-breaking agreement between its main hotel and tourism training centre, INSTROCT (part of the *Bonyad*), and the University of Strathclyde. This was the first international educational collaboration between Iran and a western country since the Islamic revolution in 1979. The Strathclyde programme (as it was known) evolved out of a series of short courses which commenced in 1996 into the delivery of the University's undergraduate degree in Hotel and Hospitality Management on site in Tehran. This initiative owned much to the vision and foresight of the tourism leadership within *Bonyad* who recognised the management skills deficiencies within their hotels and the wider tourism sector.

In 1999, it was estimated that Iran's international and domestic transportation system, and related tourist facilities and services, handled the requirements of 1.3 million international visitors and 32.5 million domestic tourists. International tourism generated estimated receipts of US$773 million (ITTO 2001). By 2004, the numbers of inbound international visitors had grown to over 1.6 million (UNWTO 2006). The trend points to significant growth in international visitors from a low point in the aftermath of war between Iran and Iraq (ITTO 2001). Many of these tourists are expatriate Iranians returning home to Iran for holidays or business tourists. Separate volumes for cultural heritage tourists are unavailable. Subject to the wider geo-political context, growth in cultural heritage tourism can be expected to continue. The current ICHHTO *Tourism Development Master Plan* targets for training places in tourism demonstrate a commitment to growth in tourism

provision to match this expected growth in demand. For 2010 these targets are projected at 236,780 places; for 2026, at 1,569,769 places. In 2010 just under six out of ten (58.1%) are targeted for handicrafts, but by 2026 this proportion is to fall slightly to 50.3%. Demonstrating a commitment to enhancing strategic skills, university places are to increase more rapidly than vocational training in all three sub-sectors planned for, handicrafts, tourism and cultural heritage.

Khatami's government also made encouraging moves to welcome foreign tourists, including creating a major programme to encourage international visitors to watch the solar eclipse in Iran in 1999. However an isolated incident led to western headlines: 'Tourists kidnapped in Iran'. 'Three Spaniards and one Italian were abducted by an armed gang' and 'Official inquiry into Iran eclipse harassment' as a result of foreign tourists visiting to view the eclipse, particularly women, were subjected to hostile slogans and harassment by Islamic hardliners (BBC, 1999). The George Bush 'axis-of-evil' speech in 2002 led to a BBC feature on 'my holidays in the axis-of-evil' (BBC, 2003) where a journalist ventured into the six countries mentioned, with the intent of showing the non-threatening character of day-to-day life in these areas. While this seemed to be the case in five of the countries (Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, Syria and Libya), in Iran the journalist was 'detained and intimidated' as the cameras, tapes and tourist visa were viewed as the instruments of spies. This type of behaviour towards visitors by Iranian authorities undermines the work done by official tourism organisations.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the rise of the Neo-Conservatives

In August 2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president; President Muhammad Khatami had served the maximum two consecutive terms in office. While Khatami and the reformists were trying to bring back concepts such as Islamic democracy, political rights of the nation and building civil society based on Islamic roles, Ahmadinejad and the neo-conservatives are more focused on and interested in the battle of populist ideals. In addition, the audiences are also different. Khatami's followers were intellectuals, academics: moderates. Ahmadinejad's followers are more religious, traditional and idealistic in terms of the Islamic Revolution.

As O'Gorman et al (2007) observe the growing recognition of, firstly, the links between tourism and the protection of Iran's national cultural heritage and, secondly, of the potential importance of tourism were reinforced with the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005. However, the *Iran Touring and Tourism Organisation* (ITTO) was merged with the *Iran Cultural Heritage Organisation* (ICHO) to form the *Iran Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation* (ICHTO). This combined institution was under the strong influence of the central government is clear with direct authority for the new organisation resting with the Vice President of the Islamic Republic. Formally, these were separate departments of the Ministry of Culture, and lacked prominence and significant control. Subsequently, handicrafts have been added to the new organisation, having been removed from the Industry Ministry. This further emphasises the links between tourism and cultural heritage. The expanded organization is called the *Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation* (ICHHTO).

The latest examples of ideology coming before the development of tourism from non-Islamic markets are focused on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the representation in the West of the anti-Zionism of Iran, its nuclear programme and its public executions. In 2006 the President made his infamous remarks on the Holocaust and subsequently hosted an international conference questioning the historicity of the Holocaust (BBC, 2006). Iran is commonly in the forefront of calling for the elimination of the Jewish state and is presented in the West as seeking to destabilise the Middle East. The United Nations' Security Council have imposed successive trade sanctions on Iran over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment. The Security Council fears that Iran is seeking to become a nuclear military power. Iran, in contrast, insists that it has the right to enrichment to make nuclear fuel to meet the country's energy needs and that it is not intent on developing nuclear weapons. At the date of writing, the International Atomic Energy Agency has found no evidence to support a charge of nuclear military ambitions on the part of Iran, but the controversy continues. Associating the UN with the USA, it is not uncommon to hear Iranians privately express their fear that the USA will attack their country with nuclear weapons to eliminate what it perceives as the nuclear threat posed by Iran.

Capital punishment provides a further dimension of controversy affecting tourism markets, and particularly public hangings and stonings. Murder, rape, drug trafficking, armed robbery, extreme corruption, adultery and homosexuality are punishable in Iran by the death penalty. Public executions have generally been for crimes that have provoked public outrage, and are sometimes televised network wide through Iran. In 2008 the chief of the Iranian judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, attempted to substantially reduce the number of public executions, amid a rise in executions to around 300 in 2007 (Tait, 2007). He has sought to require all public executions to be approved by himself, and that those sentenced to death are usually to be killed in private. Images of homosexuals being publicly hanged from cranes have simply added to Iran's negative image in the West, and thus on its development of tourism from these markets.

Today, Iran is a country where many Western governments seek to guide the travel intentions of their nationals. For example, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office issues clear travel warnings for visitors to Iran. They strongly advise against all travel to within 100km of the entire Iran/Afghanistan border or to within 10km of the entire Iran/Iraq border (FCO, 2009). Further they advise that the Pakistan border area is also insecure, and advise against any travel east of the line running from Kerman to Bandar Abbas. The latter includes all travel to the World Heritage site of Bam (Table 1). Dangers listed for visitors to these areas include banditry, drug-traffickers, violent attacks and kidnapping. Even in the cities that are 'safe' there is the stern warning that Iran has one of the highest rates of road accidents in the world. Most of the accidents are due to dilapidated vehicles and/or reckless driving. Many pedestrians are killed on the roads, and tourists are warned to exercise great care when crossing streets (FCO, 2009).

Reflections

In terms of a conventional staged models of tourism growth, say that of Doxey (1976), Iran is on the first stage of international cultural and heritage tourism development, despite the long antecedence of business tourism within the country and domestic tourism for relaxation. Moreover, Iran provides an interesting challenge to the application of Butler's (1980) tourism area life cycle in terms of how radical political change may interrupt expected progression within the lifecycle. Prior to the Islamic revolution, it is fair to assess that Iran's tourism development equated to the late involvement or early development stage within Butler's model, having moved beyond the exploration and early involvement stages as a result of significant public sector engagement and political will. Such progression ended dramatically in 1979 as a result of the revolution and subsequent political ambivalence to tourism combined with the effects of the Iran – Iraq war has meant that there has been an enforced stagnation of development at an exploration level. Notwithstanding political will in some quarters, there is little evidence of real progress into the development phase.

The future of tourism in Iran depends on the tenor of the government, whether it be Islamic traditionalist or Islamic liberalist. In Iran religion and politics are inescapably intertwined and inseparable, with the priority of religion over politics. This is highlighted in the changing emphasis of the UNESCO list where cultural heritage is being reshaped according to religious and political ideology. President Jimmy Carter, during a State dinner in Tehran in late December 1977, described Iran 'an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world'; this serves as a salient warning to those tempted to make predictions about the future of Iran. Anti -Israeli rhetoric, holocaust denial, uncertain nuclear aims and ambitions, pollution, traffic, false imprisonment, hangings and stoning all serve to undermine the attractiveness of Iran as a destination.

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Table 1. Iranian Monuments Inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Name	Inscription date	Date (approx)	Description
Bam and its Cultural Landscape	2004	C7th - C11th AD	Medieval Mud Town – Built at crossroads of important trade routes and known for the production of silk and cotton
Bisotun	2006	521BC	Archaeological site with bas-relief and cuneiform inscription - Located along the ancient trade route linking the Iranian high plateau with Mesopotamia
Meidan Emam, Esfahan	1979	17th Century	Isfahan's famous square built during Shah Abbas Safavid (I) – bordered on all sides by monumental buildings.
Pasargadae	2004	6th Century BC	The first dynastic capital of the Achaemenid Empire founded by Cyrus (II) the great. Also known as the capital of the first great multicultural empire in Western Asia- located in Pars- homeland of Persians.
Persepolis	1979	518 BC	Founded by Darius (I). It was the capital of the Achaemenid Empire inspired by Mesopotamian models.
Soltaniyeh	2005	1302-12	The mausoleum of Oljaytu which was constructed in 1302–12 in the city of Soltaniyeh situated in the province of Zanjan.
Takht-e Soleyman	2003	6th and 7th and 13th Century	The site includes the principal Zoroastrian sanctuary partly rebuilt in the Ilkhanid (Mongol) period as well as a temple of the Sasanid period dedicated to Anahita. Located in northwest of Iran in a valley set in a volcanic mountain region.
Tchogha Zanbil	1979	1250BC	Ruins of the holy city of the Kingdom of Elam