

## Impact of Religious Tourism on the Economy of Countries (Case Study: Iranian Religious tourism)

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to indicate the direct relationship between religious tourism, understood as pilgrimage and economy. At first some total information has been given about the importance of the subject and the overall concepts of the expressions should be discussed then the importance of religious tourism in the world and significant destinations related to religious tourism has been explained.

Research hypotheses have been tested through variance analysis and the verified hypotheses were tested again using Duncan method for more certainty.

**KEYWORDS:** religion, tourism, economy.

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### INTRODUCTION

Tourism in general and religious one as its important kind has attracted many researchers to go through new ways of improving and developing it in the world nowadays. A professional conference held by Cyprus Tourism board discussing the importance and potentials of religious tourism for the first time in the world in 2006. (Alvani&Pirouzbakht, 2006) In Iran just a few works have been done to improve it although some of university staff members and authorities in its related organizations have become interested in writing some papers and doing some projects about religious tourism and its potentials in Iran. (Arabi&Izadi, 2005) Even if they are almost theoretical not practical in their essence, it is probably an indicator of good days for religious tourism in the coming future in Iran. Taking look back to the history we can find many indicators showing the importance of religious tourism in past. (Rahimpour, 2002)

Most of the schools, bazaars, caravansaries, and economic departments have been built besides Mosques, shrines, tombs, and other religious sites. The reason is that because the people were interested in going to visit those religious sites, it could generate many jobs and income. (PapoliYazdi&Saqai, 2006) An example of this kind is Abbassi Hotel (King's mother) in Isfahan in Safavid era that King's mother school was fed from the income of that Caravansary or Tabriz bazaar as the biggest covered market in the world has built beside an important mosque called Sahib olAmr. Some examples of those mentioned works done on tourism in Iran recently can be named as followings:

It has been ordered 34 hour lesson with the name of religious tourism in a course of tourism geography and planning in Tehran Azad University of Science and Researches.

Establishing a Committee in Iran Cultural Heritages, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization in 2006 is going to consider the potentials and weak points of religious tourism in Iran. In this committee which can be named as interorganizational one consists of high ranked authorities of several organizations of the country so it can be argued that it's a strong board of directors. (Rastgar, 2006)

A conference held by CHN (Cultural Heritage News agency) in Tehran in February 2007 although it was not welcomed by the authorities of Iran Cultural Heritages, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization.

### Statement of Problem

As tourism's great growth worldwide has provided a huge social and economic windfall it has become a high priority agenda item for nations and communities everywhere. Its positive economic impacts continue to be cited for justification of tourism development. But a new awareness of several negative impacts, especially on the environment, is not stimulating a greater demand for fresh ideas and processes that can guide growth such stress- the need for more and better planning.

Throughout the World today most tourism leaders continue a dominant policy of travel promotion, based on the simple rule of the more tourists the better economy. (Tarlow, 2005) Billions of dollars are spent by public and private interests on advertising and publicity to attract greater travel. Mass tourism has become an unprecedented phenomenon. Personal benefits and new economic support have exceeded all expectations.

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To be sure about the claims mentioned above simply we can view the statistics issued by UNWTO recently. As it shows the international tourism had a great growth from 480 million in 1995 to 842 million in 2006. Comparing the last two years we can see there is around 36 million increases in the number of tourists with 4.5% growth from 2005 to 2006. This growth will continue in the next years as it will reach to 1.6 billion international tourists in 2020. Computing this financially, we will see that international tourism has approximately received 680 million dollars in 2005. The statistics informed by UNWTO for 2005 clearly categorizes market share of each branch of tourism industry. In 2005, the majority of international tourist arrivals corresponded to trips for the purpose of leisure, recreation and holidays (50%) reaching a total of 402 million. Business travel accounted for some 16 percent of the total (125 million) and another 26% consisted of travel for other motives, such as visiting friends and relatives (VFR), religious purposes/pilgrimages, health treatment, etc (212 million). For the remaining 8% of arrivals the purpose of visit was not specified. (Singh, 2003)

Tourism is going to be emphasized in all countries in the World in accordance to its potentials existed. Nowadays it is extensively influencing all the society. In the mean time, cultural tourism especially its religious kind has become an important phenomenon and plays a key role in developing tourism in the countries holding religious sites and attractions. Religion is a mean to draw the attention of tourists to countries like Spain, France, Saudi Arabia, India, Syria, and so on at present. By developing religious tourism, these countries make the best of their potentials and their enduring heritage as an economic mean to absorb investment. Undertaking serious measures, other countries have started a competition with a great number of countries in the World. The latest statistics show religious (pilgrimage) tourism is of great potentials to make a high rate of income for the countries and absorb thousands of passengers a year like Santiago de Compostela in Spain or Vatican in Italy. The fast growth of religious tourism in the last few years has dramatically altered the way the architectural heritage of Spanish cities is perceived and preserved the change in the outlook has affected both the local population and political and economic authorities. The revival of an old medieval pilgrimage road- the Route to Santiago – in the 1990s has entailed the rise to cultural prominence of a number of northwestern Spanish cities and towns.

Moving from Europe to Asia will show us the importance of religious tourism much better. Asia a continent of all kinds of religions and beliefs is holding lots of religious heritages from different eras. All the important religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism have got their roots in this region of the World. Most of the countries in Asia are multi religion because of existence of all mentioned religions there. India, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Israel, and South Eastern countries are all examples in Asia. For the reason mentioned above these countries are attracting so many people from all over the world just for the purpose of religious kind of tourism. Statistics show that religious tourism is doing the same in Asia by attracting more than 75 million tourists to KumbhaMela in India in 2001 or 2.5 million pilgrims to Mecca each year is ranked at top of religious tourism criteria. (Fischer, 2001)

In following our topic, we come to Iranian Religious Tourism as my case study. Although Iran tourism industry suffers internationally from a lot of problems, its internal tourism mostly in part of religious one is spending its glorious days. It is a country being famous for the cradle for spiritualism and religious growth from time immemorial. One will find all religions co-existing harmoniously and contributing to ones evolution since ages. Zoroastrian has its roots in Iran and has spread worldwide. Islam & Christianity have deep rooted influence on Iranians lives under the influence of various dynasties and rulers of bygone eras.

In the present day modern Iran, all the religions grow and exist harmoniously and contribute meaningfully towards the evolution of a mature society.

This maturity, understanding, belief and practices have resulted in the composite growth of culture, history and architecture here. These practices are all too visible in the poetry, literature, publications, artworks, customs, paintings, jewelries, cuisine and mindset of people as well.

The spiritualism and religion of Iran adds meaning to ones desire for peace, inner evolution and quest for excellence towards God and mankind. Under the section, we dwell on all aspects on understanding of various religions, sects & practices. One may find the section suited for information, salient features of religion as practices, adopted and followed in different parts of Iran and its influence on the social structure. Religious & Spiritual Tourism forms a cornerstone of proper understanding and in surrender to deep rooted faith of all. Various places, shrines and temples have special significance for our desire to attain salvation. Specialized packages and options are offered for exploring them. Iranians because of high belief on God, his Prophets, and all religious leaders of different religions are one of the most interested nations traveling to visit as pilgrims the Holy sites in all over the World. The cities Mashhad, Qom, Rey, and Shiraz are four religious cities in Iran with attracting over 20 millions of population each year. Almost 16 millions have visited Mashhad in the year 1384 (2005- 2006) by spending around 2.705 billion dollars. Mashhad on its own has received 40% of investments of tourism organizations in the country. Like that Qom, Rey, and Shiraz are all doing in the way as Mashhad. Beside those Islamic Shiite cities, there are other religious cities in Iran full of tourists especially religious ones in some occasions of the year. Of those we can name Yazd, Ardebil, and Susa. In addition there are 6457 holy shrines and sites all around the country receiving

30.569 billion dollars in the year 1384 (2005-2006). These statistics and facts are going to force us to be more carious about the importance of how to develop international religious tourism in Iran.

Thinking deeply on these data may lead everybody's thought to be carious about religious tourism in Iran because of its incomparable potentials to be used. Considering great potentials in religious tourism, as experts assert, development of this has not been received serious attention. While Iran is one of the richest countries in the World for having oil resources no body have thought deeply about other resources may help the country economically. Everyone considering these facts will be interested in studying and doing research about Iranian religious potentials as an important instrument to improve tourism industry in Iran. As a new subject, tourism in general and religious one in accordance to its mentioned potentials in Iran seems to be best instruments to help the recovery of tourism industry in Iran. According to the scientists' speeches, oil resources will end in the coming 50 years. In this paper it will be tried to show the readers Iran can support itself without any help of oil and other petroleum resources just by understanding the importance of tourism especially religious tourism and planning to attract the tourists to come to the country. (Rassol, 2007)

### **Purpose of Research**

Any research or survey is usually following different kinds of aims and purposes. In general, the research with no aim is something wasting the time. As a result this thesis is following some aims in accordance to its nature as religious tourism. It is also aimed to widen the understanding of the significance of religious tourism in the nations' economics and as a result its influence on the other elements of the society such social, cultural, and industrial aspects. We must accept that religious tourism is neither a blessing nor a blight, neither poison nor panacea. It can bring great benefits, but it can also bring social problems. The world has experienced in how to increase the benefits of tourism, and at least some experience in how to lesson social problems. What has to be done is to balance the benefits and costs to come up with the best cost/benefit result. Thinking in the way like the idea mentioned above, this thesis is going to show you here the main aims and purposes in the future as followings although we will discuss other aims and also in advance the problems that religious tourism may create in the society.

- Provides employment opportunities, both skilled and unskilled, because it is a labor-intensive industry.
- Increase incomes
- Spread development
- Has a multiplier impact
- Broadens cultural horizons and improves feelings of self-worth
- Improves the quality of life related to a higher level of income and improved standards of living
- Can be built on existing infrastructure
- Trends to be one of the most compatible economic development activities available to an area, complementing other economic activities
- Reinforce preservation of heritage and tradition
- Break down language, sociocultural, class, racial, political, and religious barriers
- Promote international understanding and peace

### **Research Applications**

The challenge here is to make aware the researchers, students, and all the people interested in religious tourism. They can use the information in this thesis to get more familiar with the cultural and religious sites and attractions of the country. As we cited in previous paragraphs, Iran is one of the ten top countries in the world for being culturally rich and having thousands of attractions to be enough to pass the records of enticing the pilgrims and religious tourists to come to the country. And also some governmental organizations in the country whose main aims is to plan and develop tourism. They follow their missions both internationally and internally. We can name some of them as below:

1. Communication and Cultural Organization (CCO)
2. Islamic Promotion Organization (IPO)
3. Iran Cultural Heritages, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization (ICHHT)
4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
5. Endowments and Charity Affairs Organization
6. Other governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

It can be inferred they will be too glad of getting this thesis as a source and guide in their planning.

### **Questions**

Working on any projects or subjects will force you to answer some important and less important questions at the end of the work. Here in this paper, I will try to find answers to some major and minor questions as bellow:

#### *Major Questions*

During the work on the subject I am working on, there'll be two major questions answered.

1. Is there any possibility to develop religious tourism in Iran?
2. Whether the religious tourism attractions of the country have the capability of attracting the international tourists?

*Minor Questions*

Trying to answer the above questions, I may encounter some other questions to be answered although my focus will be on those mentioned above.

1. Is it possible to create new jobs especially for young population by developing religious tourism in the country?
2. Does Iran have necessary facilities to develop its religious tourism?
3. Are Iranian politicians and government authorities interested in developing religious tourism in the country?

**Hypothesis**

1. We can create more income to the country by motivating the international tourists to come and visit our religious sites and shrines.
2. It will be easy to come over the social abnormalities by developing the religious tourism in the country.
3. It's the best way to create new jobs for young populations of the country by promoting the religious tourism specially the international kind of it.

**METHODOLOGY**

Methodology is any thesis's important element. Without having pure methods in working on the thesis rarely we will come to an end successfully. This thesis is done on the basis of practical studies by taking into account the other ways such as library studies, and internet searching for the materials. To get more benefits of the libraries available in Tehran, The author has tried to get the membership card of big libraries like Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and tourism Library, Canon Ansar Library, the Endowments and Charity Organization Library, and some Universities Libraries.

**RESEARCH RESULTS**

*First hypothesis: We can create more income to the country by motivating the international tourists to come and visit our religious sites and shrines.*

Table 1: variance analysis of large income for country

**ANOVA**

Y

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1878.289	2	939.144	72.436	.000
Within Groups	4952.708	318	12.965		
Total	6830.997	320			

As sig value is less than 0.05, therefore  $H_0$  is rejected and research hypothesis is verified. In other words, we can create a large income for the country with attracting international tourists to visit religious centers (shrines).

Table 2. Duncan test table for large income

c

Duncan a,b

ö/jüby ¶ c	N	Subset for alpha = .05		
		1	2	3
♩	50	31.3750		
♩	123		32.6707	
♩	147			37.1556
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

- a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 120.426.
- b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

Duncan test table indicates that we can create a large income for the country with attracting international tourists to visit religious centers (shrines). In fact, as international tourists' attraction increases, a larger income will enter the country.

**Second hypothesis:** It will be easy to come over the social abnormalities by developing the religious tourism in the country.

Table 3.Variance analysis of reducing problems and shortages

**ANOVA**

Y

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1318.048	2	659.024	45.665	.000
Within Groups	5512.949	318	14.432		
Total	6830.997	320			

Because sig equals 0.0%, and it is less than 0.05, therefore  $H_0$  is rejected and the research hypothesis is accepted. In other words, development of pilgrimage tourism will play an important role in dealing with problems and shortages.

Table 4.Duncan test for reducing problems and shortages

Y

Duncan<sup>a,b</sup>

Duncan <sup>a,b</sup>	N	Subset for alpha = .05		
		1	2	3
1	62	31.4206		
2	100		33.0179	
3	158			36.3736
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

- a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 120.589.
- b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

Duncan test table indicates that development of pilgrimage tourism will result in reduction of problems and shortages. As it can be seen, the higher is tourism development, the more reduction will occur in problems and shortages.

**Third hypothesis:** It's the best way to create new jobs for young populations of the country by promoting the religious tourism specially the international kind of it.

Table 5.Variance analysis table for young populations

**ANOVA**

Y

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1154.140	2	577.070	38.831	.000
Within Groups	5676.857	318	14.861		
Total	6830.997	320			

As sig value is 0.0% which is less than 0.05, therefore  $H_0$  is rejected and the research hypothesis is accepted. In other words, developing pilgrimage tourism, especially of international type, can lead to establishment of steady occupation for young populations of the country.

Table 6. Duncan test table of occupation for young population

**Y**

Duncan <sup>a,b</sup>

$\langle \text{v} \ddot{a} \text{u}^{\text{TM}} \ddot{E} \ddot{V} \ddot{Z} \text{w} \ddot{N} \ddot{C} \rangle$	N	Subset for alpha = .05		
		1	2	3
♩	31	31.7143		
♩	114		32.8000	
♩	175			36.2857
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

- a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 119.490.
- b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

Duncan test table indicates that international tourism development can help create steady occupation for young populations. As it can be seen, as international tourism increases, more occupational opportunities can be provided for younger populations.

**Conclusion**

The consequences of this thesis show that the tourists’ visitation behaviors are linked to the tourists’ religion and their level of religious belief. According to its level, participants may be different based on the meaning they join to the site, and their understanding of that site in relation to their own heritage.

This may provide information relevant for the operational and strategic management of tourist sites. For example, those who market a religious site may find it appropriate to market the site in different ways to different people, according to their religious affiliation, as they will be motivated to visit the site for different reasons. The fact that tourists could be differentiated based on their strength of religious belief also may influence the way the site is marketed. The results indicate differences in the use of interpretation methods. It may be worthwhile for those who manage and study such sites to determine whether the link between tourists and the heritage presented is useful for understanding the tourists’ demand for interpretation methods.

As suggested before, it is argued that other factors can explain tourists’ behavior and their experience of a site in the context of other heritage attractions. To manage such sites better, it is suggested that those who manage heritage attractions need to explore those core factors that affect tourists’ perception of a site in relation to their own heritage.

Many different interpretations of pilgrimages force us to take serious that the demand for spiritual experiences is growing.

- The word of pilgrimage is very high on everyone’s priority list. It can be a good indication of increasing interest in pilgrimage throughout the world.
- This thesis highlighted the vast diversity of pilgrimage destinations and resources all over the world. The value of pilgrimage in social and economic terms is invaluable.
- Pilgrimage is interrelated with different forms of tourism such as natural and cultural heritage tourism, rural tourism and like many other forms of tourism must be given enough attention on quality respect and cooperation. Pilgrimage coincides in time and place with non religious cultural tourists that takes place in religious buildings or sites, which can be generally considered to be one of the varieties of the segment usually called cultural tourism.
- By doing pilgrimage through the cultural routes as a concrete application of the trans-boarder cooperation and dialogue between cultures and religions societies can overcome distances, borders and incomprehension. They are a place of tolerance, mutual acquaintance and solidarity.
- Pilgrims are becoming more expertise in their demands for travel and it is not important how much to pay for quality experience. As it is said in the text communities around sacred sites are no less in need of jobs, revenue, and public services. Pilgrimage is a chance for them to get benefits economically and socially from the development of this form of travel. The economic benefits are clear, and many communities rely approximately entirely upon the religious and spiritual tourism product of services

The special place of Iran for having religious pilgrimage attraction for attracting Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian and Jewish pilgrims is so much that Iran has a strategic benefit in this field. This attraction is considered as an important part of cultural attraction in the 21st century as the century of culture and ethnic tourism theories. The special situation of pilgrimage section as a branch of religious tourism that doesn't face most problems of its activities in Iran such as lack of security, cultural differences, political problems, unacquaintance of the Organization, executive legal institution, makes us to recall the necessity of more working and activities in the pilgrimage section to attract the foreign pilgrims. The current activities in existing the pilgrimage section except for pilgrims to Syria is a monopoly under the state (organization for Hajj and pilgrimage). In The case of entering pilgrims not only wasn't there such a monopoly but also the state as a caretaker had no effect to attract foreign pilgrims. Fortunately, nowadays, the subject has been defined as the basic aims and duties of Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and tourism Organization to study and to do researches about the pilgrimage and tourism attractions of the country to represent the required programs for introducing the attraction to exploit them and to study, prepare and try to implement suitable plans to attract tourists to Iran in the three sections of investigation, the evolution and clarification.

Despite the importance of marketing system in comprehensive planning of religious tourism, little serious activities are seen in this field so that the international religious tourism marketing system in Iran is not comparable with the world marketing. Even, one does not see the pilgrimage and religious tourism section in the poor propaganda done by the state and the private sector, separation of the sources sending pilgrims to Iran indicates that the main resources for the Muslim pilgrims are the neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq and Azerbaijan. This shows that the Shiite – inhabited neighbors of Iran in the Middle East can be main sources for sending pilgrims to Iran adding the Shiite minorities of the countries like Saudi Arabia, Yemen and United Arab Emirates.

Identifying and grouping the pilgrimage attractions of the Muslims, Zoroastrians , Christians and the Jewish allows the pilgrims to prioritize their pilgrimages along with knowing their destinations , or if intended , to choose based on the sets of information and facilities . On the other hand, grouping the religious pilgrimage attractions in Iran, can lead to discovery and representation of special attractions that are not quite clear, such as the route Imam Reza from Medina to Marv.

Nowadays, when we talk about the strategy for pilgrimage tourism development, the countries actually follow their policies in proportion with their potentials and facilities appropriates for themselves. Therefore it seems that there are no unified patterns, in the world to be followed as the pilgrimage development patterns. The development experts also believe that the development and under developed countries should regulate their development plans in proportion with their situations, facilities and environmental conditions. The same is in our country. Anyway with the present understanding about our country, we have to implement the policies that actually lead to the expected results and reduce the deviation from the previously developed plans to the least possible. To get this certainly, we have to study to pay much attention to the potentials relating to pilgrimage development meanwhile, we should study the suitable ways to encourage the touristic markets. It is natural that just saying the existence of resources and facilities and attractions can never be the origin of economic evolutions in a country. The important thing is that the touristic flows leaf to that country and provide it with the fields of economic evolutions. Therefore, the way of making suitable strategies for encouraging the internal pilgrimage markets and knowing the touristic target markets and how to choose them are emphasized in planning models even the cultural and social problems or ideological beliefs in our country, the host society has always some sensitivities. These sensitivities must be considered in pilgrimage planning models. These pilgrims, who have the least contradictions with the host society, must be considered as the target ones. You know that the pilgrimage development is to same extent predictable, if pursued it can lead to fruitful and valuable results. But if we follow the pilgrimage development without planning, the consequences of non- aimed pilgrimage development will appear in the environmental social and cultural areas. Therefore, the experts for pilgrimage planning and development present very accurate and scientific discussions that are in fact the accurate studies and investigation of tourism development.

Thus, an absolute scientific and careful discussion in this line is put forward by the planning and tourism development experts. A concept namely capacity exists which refers exactly to the assessment of the level of pilgrimage development in the country. It deals about the issue that pilgrimage development is to what extent recommended? What are the acceptable limits for attraction of international pilgrims or development of domestic pilgrimage? Is the mass tourism enforceable in our country as a model which has been carried out in some countries? It is recommended that the policy of countries such as Syria and Saudi Arabia to be followed which are trying to attract tourists who are both economically and culturally rich. Instead of performing programs which cause flow of countless tourists to the country. We should spot target markets which may be few, but will have more positive economic and less negative cultural effects.

At the beginning of this thesis some questions came to the author's mind which was the main reason of working on this subject. Now, it is easy to judge about that question. Fortunately, from the author's point of view all

the questions can have positive answers if the suggestions mentioned in chapter five observed. According to the potentials and highlights of Iranian religious tourism shown during chapter four and five, everybody can reach to this idea that Iranian authorities have the easiest way to improve religious tourism and become number one in the region. To talk about the potentiality of religious tourism to create new jobs for young generation, it is enough just to have a view on the statistical data given in chapter five. Although Iranian tourism industry spends its black days in international tourism, it is not too difficult for authorities to make plans for internal religious tourism at least to improve the employment rate in religious cities. Each year billions of dollars flow to Mashhad and Qum as the most important religious cities. It is indeed a weakness for all the organizations responsible for tourism in Iran meanwhile as it is told earlier just thinking a bit about the subject will help them to come over this problem that you can find many unemployed persons in those cities mentioned.

By taking into account those suggestions, it will be also easy to survive Iranian religious tourism internationally. One way that is the author's special suggestion is to think about the religious routes that are now in Europe is done with the name cultural routes.. Why we don't have some plans to attract a person from Uzbekistan who is going to Mecca to go through the country to visit Iranian religious attractions and then go to Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey and finally to his/her home? It will be possible for tourism responsible authorities just if they think a bit free from policy. It will be done if they come together with the regions countries tourism authorities although at the time it is one of the most difficult jobs to be done because of political problems among the politicians of the region.

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