RESEARCH NOTE

BEYOND HISTORICAL ADVERSARIES: EXPLORING NEW GROUNDS FOR PEACE THROUGH TOURISM BETWEEN IRAN AND THE US

YEGANEH AGHAZAMANI AND CARTER A. HUNT

Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management,
Penn State University, University Park, PA, USA

Scholars are increasingly exploring tourism as a means of promoting peace, largely on the basis that cultural understanding and interaction occur when particular forms of host–guest contact occur. The purpose of this article is to apply theoretical insights from the growing body of scholarship on tourism-related peace that would be most relevant to tourism between two historical adversaries: Iran and the US. After touching upon the historical and current nature of tourism to Iran, we focused on theoretically informed opportunities for peace through tourism between these two countries, that is, the forms of US visitation most likely to facilitate tourism-related improvements in relations between citizens of these two countries. The policy and planning recommendations emphasized here will be of relevance to those interested in tourism-facilitated peace regardless of geographic context.

Key words: Peace; Tourism; Politics; Contact hypothesis; Iran; United States

Introduction

Once heralded as "the single largest peaceful movement of people across cultural boundaries in the history of the world" (Lett, 1989, p. 275), tourism is receiving increasing attention as a means of generating peace. The growing interest in the notion of participatory peace stemming from world citizens interacting in the context of tourism is evident by the three recent edited volumes on the topic (Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013; Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010; Wohlmuther & Wintersteiner, 2013). While readers are directed to those volumes for a full review of that scholarship, this research note explores opportunities for peace through tourism in one particularly challenging context—US travelers to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Coupling relevant policy and planning insights from the literature on

Address correspondence to Yeganeh Aghazamani, Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, Penn State University, 801C, Donald H. Ford Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA. E-mail: yua124@psu.edu

peace and tourism with a succinct overview of the historical nature and current trends in tourism visitation in Iran, this writing provides recommendation for tourism developments most likely to improve diplomatic relations between the citizens of these two historical adversaries.

Peace and Tourism

Peace can be conceived of as either the *presence* of desirable qualities, such as those that contribute to well-being, justice, freedom, and equality, or as the *absence* of undesirable qualities, such as war, terrorism, and violence (D'Amore, 1988; Litvin, 1998; Muller, 2003). In situations where world citizens "work both independently and with each other to the extent that peace becomes a chosen way of life" (Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010, p. xix), participatory peace arises. This involves the presence of desirable, positive peace and the absence of undesirable, negative peace. Tourism can encourage participatory peace because it provides opportunities for understanding and appreciating ways of life different from one's own, and in the process, it can also improve intercultural relations, promote understanding and reconciliation, and soften negative attitudes and images (Causevic, 2010; Maoz, 2010; Shin, 2010). Because these outcomes rely on cooperative, intimate, and open-minded contact between peoples of equal socioeconomic status during the travel experience, this perspective is known as the "contact hypothesis" (Amir, 1969, modified by Milman, Reichel, & Pizam, 1990).

The contact hypothesis has proven challenging to definitively confirm. One camp of scholars suggests tourism's contribution to peace lacks empirical confirmation (Din, 1988) and points out that tourism is as likely to lead to negative attitudes between hosts and guests (Pizam, 1996). Empirical study has shown that the relationship between tourism and peace is both weak and slow (Cho, 2007; Shin, 2010). Despite a lack of empirical support, the contact hypothesis is sustained in conceptual studies (e.g., Isaac, 2013; Isaac & Platenkamp, 2010; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2010). Although these scholars insist peace-related outcomes of tourism manifest primarily at the individual level, the scale of the tourism industry demands optimism for microlevel changes accumulating over

time and, in turn, influencing diplomatic relations between nations.

Potential for Peace Through Tourism Between the US and Iran

In the first half of the 20th century, Iran and the US enjoyed a mutualistic political relationship. When the Shah Pahlavi's dynasty abruptly ended during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, diplomatic relations between the countries soured dramatically. Revolutionaries raided the US embassy and created a hostage crisis involving 52 American diplomats, lasting 444 days, and elevating tension between the two countries to all-time highs (Leverett & Man-Leverett, 2013). Afterward the longest lasting war of the 20th century commenced when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980. US support of the Iraqi invasion and its involvement in the downing of an Iranian commercial jetliner ensured strong Iranian criticism throughout the 1980s (Friedman, 1993).

In subsequent years, Western media outlets aggravated political tensions by propagating negative, at times hostile images of the Iranian people and government (Leverett & Man-Leverett, 2013). Recent telephone surveys of Americans over the age of 18 found that 87% of Americans still view Iranian influence on the world negatively (BBC World Service, 2013). Yet recent direct communication between Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani—the first communication between presidents of these two countries since 1979—indicates a thawing of diplomatic tension may be underway. Indeed, the number of Americans who see Iran as America's greatest enemy decreased slightly between 2012 and 2014 (Jones, 2014). The question of whether or not tourism can promote further thawing of tensions between politically conflicted countries is more compelling than ever.

Tourism in Iran

With a population of 75,149,669 and an area of 1,648,195 km², Iran is a land of diverse climates, cultures, and people. Located at an intersection of civilizations along the Silk Road, the global significance of Iran's rich cultural assets have been acknowledged by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),

which has declared 16 World Heritage sites in Iran. This heritage provides immense tourism resources, yet tourism visitation rates have yet to recover from the insecurity of the revolution and the Iran–Iraq war. The number of international tourists plummeted from 680,000 in 1978 to just 9,300 in 1990. Many tourism professionals left the industry and tourism infrastructure (e.g., hotels) was reassigned to governmental, military, and social institutions.

Today the direct contribution of travel and tourism to Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) and to employment is a mere 2.2% of total GDP and 1.9%, respectively [World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), 2014]. International visitors consist of those traveling for business (30%), religious pilgrimages (30%), and visiting family and friends (26%), markets that favor the urban destinations of Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Tabriz, Kish Island, and Mashhad (O'Gorman, Baum, & McLellan, 2007). Eighty percent of these international visitors originate in neighboring countries and generate low per capita expenditures. With oil's dominant position in its national economy, Iran remains one of the least tourism-dependent countries in the world. Yet in the years since 2004 tourism's direct contribution to GDP and tourism-related employment rates are increasing. The number of foreign tourist arrivals grew from 1.8 million in 2004 to 3.4 million in 2014, and tourism generated nearly US$1,549,313 in visitor exports in 2013 [United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2014]. Although international visitation provided 18.5% of tourism's contribution to GDP, domestic travelers generate the bulk (81.5%) of 2013's tourism-related revenues in Iran (WTTC, 2014). This suggests much growth potential in international visitation.

Although Iran possesses great potential for tourism-related growth, several factors have limited tourism's development. A hostile, uninviting image perpetuated by Western media remains a prohibitive factor, though other issues contribute. The immense cultural distance between Islamic society and Western cultures contributes to a fear of the unknown; furthermore, Iran makes little concerted marketing effort to overcome this distance and attract foreign tourists. Iran also has complex visa requirements exacerbated by a lack of coordination between tourism institutes (Naseri, 1996). A dearth of educated professionals in the tourism

sector, little willingness in private sector to invest on tourism, and few financial amenities such as loans for tourism-related businesses also inhibit tourism potential (H. Ghafari & Molaie, 2001). In spite of these challenges, the WTTC statistics predict international tourism will grow dramatically by 2024 (WTTC, 2014). Attracting international tourists has finally been named a priority of the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHTO, 2011).

US Visitation to Iran

Despite having less than a quarter of the population, the US is second only to China with US$86.2 billion in international tourism expenditures and tied for second with Germany with 7.4% of global outbound tourist market share (UNWTO, 2014). These high per capita expenditures by American travelers makes the US market an important target for any destination marketers. The intensity of the historic tension between Iran and the US creates an especially challenging context in which to explore opportunities for tourism-supported peace. Yet when American tourists to Iran were studied prior to the Islamic Revolution, most Americans (+75%) described their trip experience as "very good" and 70% were willing to return (Binazir, 1976). In the absence of political tension, Americans have enjoyed visiting the country and culture of Iran. Yet after the Islamic Revolution, Iran intentionally avoided targeting international, Western tourists (Hafeznia, Eftekhari, & Ramazani, 2007).

Presently there is no recent documentation of American tourists' prior travel motivations or past experiences visiting Iran, and this lack of awareness of the various American market segments hinders effective promotion (Alipour & Heydari, 2004; R. Ghafari & Harchegani, 2008; O'Gorman et al., 2007). American tourists are unlikely to consider Iran a safe tourism destination given the insecure image perpetuated by US Department of State (USDOS) Travel Advisories warning Americans to "carefully consider the risks of travel to Iran" (USDOS, 2013). Yet targeting the affluent US market remains a great opportunity for Iran. Fortunately the diplomatic tensions have diminished since Rouhani assumed the Iranian presidency in 2012. In direct talks and a personal visit the US,

Rouhani promised to ease visa restrictions. The US responded amicably by reducing economic sanctions (Dehghan, 2013).

Capitalizing on the Opportunities

With reduced political tensions come new opportunities. American tourists already exhibit greater willingness to visit Iran (Reynolds, 2013). Based on the emergent scholarship on tourism-related peace (Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013; Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010; Wohlmuther & Wintersteiner, 2013), and this current tourism atmosphere in Iran, there are several opportunities to foster forms of tourism that encourage peaceful relations between Iranian hosts and American guests. On the structural side, host–guest interactions in accordance with the tenets of the contact hypothesis must exist. To that end, the Iranian government needs to first move forward with its promises to simplify and streamline the visa process for international travelers. Increasing the quota of visas available for those visiting strictly for touristic purposes is also necessary. These changes will require additional staffing needs at the "virtual embassy" for Iran inside the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, DC. Eventually an official Iranian embassy or consulate in the US should be opened.

Although cultural and heritage resources remain the principle attraction for tourists to Iran, the facilitation of international visits to Iran provides an opportunity to reconsider these historical models in term of direct host–guest interactions. Contact hypothesis theory suggests particular forms of contact—voluntary and intimate interactions between hosts and guests who share common goals—will have the greatest influence on positive attitude change (Etter, 2007). While the hypothesis suggests contact between individuals of equal status or in approving social climates is not necessary per se, such interactions are encouraged. Promoting better interactions requires developing additional tourism infrastructure that permits visitors to stay directly with local Iranian hosts. Although home-stay opportunities in rural areas of Iran already exist, the practice is uncommon in the commonly visited urban areas. The "Cluster Eco-Tour" is a new network of Iranian tour operators who offer tours to unique natural and historical destinations of Iran in rural areas, and in the process, lodge travelers with local families who provide local food and customs. Networks of home-stay, convivial tourism operators, or more contemporary technological mechanisms such as AirBnB foster this type of intimate and informal host–guest contact.

Researchers have also found that sporting events reduce intergroup boundaries and encourage contact between different ethnic groups, especially the youth of these groups (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2010). Sport-related travel for high school and college students can provide these countries' next generation with the important face-to-face interactions likely to encourage improved, peaceful relations. Scholarships, grants, and student exchange programs can facilitate sport-related and academic exchange opportunities for students and scholars to become immersed in the hosts' culture and society. American and Iranian students embark on friendships during trips that can continue afterward via online, digital means. To the extent that the dialogue initiated during travel continues between hosts and guests afterward, peace-related outcomes are likely to be more pronounced (Tutsuya, 2013).

Based on the rich heritage of Iran, cultural tourism will continue as the principle amenity for attracting American tourists to Iran. Tours of Iran's significant heritage resources coupled with opportunities for convivial tourism with local residents will likely sensitize tourists to host culture and convert those traveling abroad to ambassadors of goodwill, that is, to be "peace-sensitive" tourists who are aware of their responsibility to create a culture of peace via their travel (Wohlmuther & Wintersteiner, 2013). Although Iran is an Islamic Republic, it is also home to many different religions including Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. The religious diversity offers tourism the potential to facilitate interreligious contact likely to increase mutual understanding by dispelling exaggerated and negative stereotypes.

New promotional strategies could also showcase Iran's attractions for world-class skiing, whitewater rafting, alpine and rock climbing, and other adventure-related tourism amenities that appeal to the rapidly growing adventure travel market, of which North American travelers are a substantial segment [Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA), 2013]. Since Iran is rich in biodiversity as well,

nature-based ecotourism opportunities could attract further special interest visitors to Iran and in the process promote additional cultural awareness and host–guest interaction. As new tourism alternatives emerge in Iran, social media (e.g., travelers' blogs, online reviews, Trip Advisor) will become increasingly influential in their direct word-of-mouth promotion. These outlets will entice prospective visitors and further dilute the hostile image of Iran conveyed through other media channels by leveraging the positive experiences of Americans who enjoyed visits to Iran. Tourism can contribute to more openness toward foreign presence (Hunt, in press), and as such an open-minded shift on the part of the Iranian government's Tourism Organization will be necessary to effectively market these new tourism opportunities in Iran.

Conclusions

This research note applies insights from the growing, yet still debated literature on tourism as a vehicle for promoting peace, diplomacy, and human security. We have offered suggestions based on that literature for how Iran can develop forms of tourism likely to sensitize travelers, correct distorted media portrayals of its cultures, and ultimately improve the relations with the citizens of other countries, in this case, those of the US. As a purely conceptual exploration, the limitations of this note are many. Yet it is with the realization that messy work must come before good work that these initial considerations are offered for ways that tourism could greater contribute to peace between these historical adversaries. Greater attention of Iranian tourism planners, policy makers, marketers, and practitioners to the ways that tourism visitation is most likely to result in improved relations will allow the country to further capture tourism's many other economic, social, and environmental benefits. Tourism researchers will play a critical role in this process.

Acknowledgments

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