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## **Tourism, peace and sustainability in sanctions-ridden destinations**

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## **Tourism, peace and sustainability in sanctions-ridden destinations**

### **Abstract**

Despite the widespread use of sanctions as a foreign policy tool in the absence of armed intervention and as a means to promote peace, there is notable absence of research on the effects of sanctions on the peacebuilding capacity of tourism and their relationship to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This situation is surprising given that both sanctions and tourism are promoted as a force for peace and reconciliation processes. Drawing upon international relations and political science and via semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the Iranian tourism and hospitality industry, this study investigates whether sanctions contribute to peace and create an environment suitable for tourism development. The findings indicate how the imposition, relaxation and then re-imposition of sanctions by international state actors as a means of peace have paralyzed the Iranian tourism industry through its psychological, sectoral, and societal effects and mobility restrictions. The consequences of sanctions and their sharp contrast with the SDGs are also explored. This study fills a significant gap in tourism research by examining the implications of the application of a widely used coercive geopolitical tool of statecraft in relation to the peace and tourism nexus.

### **Keywords**

Sanctions, crisis, peace through tourism, reconciliation, Sustainable Development Goals, geopolitics of tourism

*“People talk about smart sanctions and crippling sanctions. I’ve never seen smart sanctions, and crippling sanctions cripple everyone, including innocent civilians, and make the government more popular”.* Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General (1997–2009) of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and joint awardee of the 2005 Nobel Prize for Peace with the IAEA for their efforts to prevent the military use of nuclear energy (quoted in Warrick, 2009).

### **1. Introduction**

Tourism has long been heralded as a force and vital source for peace (D’Amore, 1988), a contributor to reconciliation processes (Farmaki, 2017), and redevelopment in post-conflict contexts (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Hall, 2017). The nexus between tourism and peace has been recognized by major tourism industry bodies such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2018), which considers tourism as ‘a catalyst for development, peace and

reconciliation’, and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2016) which views tourism as a ‘driver of peace’. Inspired by Goal 16 of the Global Goals (officially known as the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]) which focus on promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies, the UNWTO (2018, p.123) suggests that “as tourism revolves around billions of encounters between people of diverse cultural backgrounds, the sector can foster multicultural and inter-faith tolerance and understanding, laying the foundation for more peaceful societies. Tourism, which benefits and engages local communities, can also consolidate peace in post-conflict societies”. Nonetheless, the economic and cultural significance of the sector alone cannot bring about peace and, clearly, peace, justice and security all contribute to tourism (Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013b; Higgins-Desbiolles & Blanchard, 2010). Pratt and Liu (2016) argue that peace has a far greater impact on tourism than tourism has on peace. Indeed, Khalilzadeh (2018) recommends the tourism and peace discourse be shifted from tourism as a ‘peacemaker’ to tourism as a ‘peacekeeper’.

This study highlights the issue of sanctions, an important yet rarely explored phenomenon in tourism and peace literature. Sanctions are a widely used instrument by international actors, including the UN Security Council (UNSC) and nation-states, to address threats to international peace and security or to preserve or restore peace (Pape, 1997; Lorenz, 2019). However, sanctions can have substantial negative consequences for tourism destinations, from reductions in tourist arrivals through to investment bans (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019a, 2020). Exploring how tourism is both a target of sanctions as well as a response is of significant value, but interestingly major international tourism policy actors, such as the UNWTO, fail to criticise sanctions regimes. More recently, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unilateral US sanctions regime on countries such as Cuba, Iran and Venezuela was criticized for its hindrance of the capacity to respond to COVID-19 with calls for the Trump administration to temporarily suspend sanctions against these countries for peaceful and humanitarian objectives (Takian, Raofi, & Kazempour-Ardebili, 2020).

Despite the widespread use of sanctions in the post-Cold War era that directly and indirectly affect tourism (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019a, 2019b, 2020), there is a notable absence of research on sanctions in the tourism and geopolitics literature (Weaver, 2010; Hall, 2017, Timothy, 2017; Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019). Although there are major research streams focusing on the paradigms of peace, tourism, conflict reconciliation and post-conflict, the use of sanctions as a means for promoting peace is largely overlooked, despite sanctions being promoted as contributing to peace (Lorenz, 2019), as well as their wider implication for tourism and the SDGs. This study therefore aims to fill these gaps. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, no study has previously examined the consequences of economic sanctions on tourism peace-building capacity.

Drawing upon the sanctions and peace literature in political science and international relations, and via a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders in the Iranian tourism industry, this study aims to understand the impacts of sanctions on Iranian tourism and to explore how sanctions affect the SDGs. Iran, which has been subject to sanctions regimes since the 1970s (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011; Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Dizaji, 2019) provides an

interesting case to explore such interrelationships. This study is also timely given the reimposition of sanctions by the USA against Iran after a short spell of relaxation of the sanctions (2015-2018) imposed in response to Iran's nuclear program and the potential implications for the country's tourism industry (Khodadadi, 2016; Ghaderi, Soltani, Henderson, & Zareei, 2018).

The paper begins with an overview of sanctions as a means for bringing peace and meeting the SDGs and a discussion of theoretical approaches to sanctions, peace and tourism. Following detailing of the research context, the research design is outlined, and the empirical results reported. The findings of this study help to construct a composite picture of the sanctions and peace nexus within a tourism context and their wider implications for SDGs.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. *Peace through sanctions***

Although there is no standard definition of an international sanction, they are usually defined in terms of state related foreign policy actions applied in relation to a perceived wrongdoing by a state, organization, individual or other identified actor (Drezner, 2011; Cortright & Lopez, 2018). Sanctions take such a variety of forms and generate various effects in different sectors of the targeted state's economy. Rossignol (1996) explains such effects:

Sanctions usually consist of a ban on the sale and shipment of products to a country and on the purchase of its exports. Other elements not directly linked to trade and commerce, such as culture and sports, are now often included. Thus, we see bans on economic, sporting, and cultural contacts between countries, as well as "person-to-person" sanctions such as withholding visas or other diplomatic documents from citizens of another state (Rossignol, 1996).

The economic restrictions imposed by sanctions occur at different scales, ranging from the economy as a whole to individual business operations. Pratt and Alizadeh (2018) categorised the economy-wide effects of sanctions as macroeconomic, direct, indirect, and induced. At the macro level, both the supply and demand side of the economy are adversely affected impacting economic growth and leading to inflationary pressures. Direct impacts include prohibition on foreign investment and imported goods as well as access to export markets. With a decrease in investment and employment cuts, corporate and market trust may also be weakened. Reputation and image are also affected by the negative perceptions often surrounding the sanctions target. Overall, sanctioned countries become more isolated from the global economic community (Ghaderi et al., 2018).

Sanctions are generally viewed as a lower-cost, lower-risk, middle ground between diplomacy and war (Masters, 2019) and often represent "the least unpalatable of the coercive alternatives available to the UN Security Council when faced with the task of taking action to maintain or restore international peace and security" (Farrall, 2007, p.3). The UN Security Council has

increasingly resorted to sanctions as part of its efforts to build peace and prevent conflict (Mack & Khan, 2000; Brzoska, 2015). Based on Chapter VII of the UN charter, if the UN Security Council determines under Article 39 the “existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression,” then under Article 41 it can authorize “complete or partial interruption of economic relations” and under Article 42 it can enforce these through “such action by air, sea or land forces as may be necessary” to maintain or restore international peace and security. Indeed, peacebuilding theory originated with the UN efforts to rebuild the international world order following World War Two and, since the end of the Cold War, sanctions have rapidly become the tool of choice for conflict prevention and peacebuilding adopted by the UN and other international organizations (Cortright & Lopez, 2018).

Prior to the post-Cold War era, there was only two notable examples of UN sanctions: comprehensive sanctions against Rhodesia in 1966 and an arms embargo against the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1979. Yet, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there has been a dramatic increase in the imposition of sanctions with the USA, UN and European Union having employed sanctions on other nations more than 500 times (Cashen, 2017). There are two main factors that contributed to the rise of sanctions in the aftermath of the Cold War (Farrall, 2007). First, from a political perspective, within the UN Security Council it is extremely difficult to garner the support necessary to authorize collective military action under Article 42 of the UN Charter (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). In contrast, the imposition of non-military sanctions is perceived as entailing fewer costs than using military action. Nevertheless, by authorizing sanctions, the Security Council has still taken symbolic action, without having to assume the costs and responsibilities for using force. Second, given the increased interdependence in the global economy since the end of the Cold War the potential effectiveness of sanctions in achieving foreign policy objectives is perceived to have increased (Farrall, 2007).

UN sanction measures encompass a broad range of economic, financial, and diplomatic options that do not involve the use of armed force (UN, 2020). The majority of these measures target state actors and have been imposed for various objectives, including compelling an occupying state to withdraw (e.g. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait); preventing a state from developing or acquiring weapons of mass destruction (e.g. North Korea, Iran); countering international terrorism (e.g. Libya, Al Qaida, Hariri sanctions regimes); stemming human rights violations (e.g. South Africa, Iran); and promoting the implementation of a peace process (e.g. Liberia) (Farrall, 2007). In the case of the EU, key objectives when adopting sanctions are: safeguarding EU’s values, fundamental interests, security, preserving peace, consolidating and supporting democracy, rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law, preventing conflict, and strengthening international security (European Council, 2019). Unilateral sanctions have also largely been adopted by individual states as a part of their foreign policy to change the behaviour of the target state instead of being involved in direct military conflict (i.e. US sanctions).

Sanctions are usually presented as a peaceful means for achieving foreign policy objectives and, as such, “are inherently part of a purely diplomatic approach geared toward avoiding a military confrontation” (Fathollah-Nejad, 2014, p.49). Nevertheless, Pape (1997) argued that

sanctions are more often a prelude to war, rather than an alternative to it. More fundamentally with respect to peace dividends, sanctions often have highly detrimental effects on the population of targeted states. For example, Peksen (2009) suggests that economic sanctions worsen government respect for human rights, including freedom from disappearance, extra-judicial killing, torture, and political imprisonment. As a result, there has been a shift from comprehensive sanctions regimes (e.g. against Iraq in the 1990s) to more ‘targeted’ or ‘smart’ sanctions (e.g. Russia), which are directed at specific individuals or entities (e.g. through asset freezes and travel bans) or by prohibiting particular activities (e.g. arms embargoes and export bans) (Farrall, 2007; Cortright & Lopez, 2018). The ‘qualitative’ shift toward smart and targeted sanctions aims to put maximum pressure on those directly involved in the sanctioned behaviour and those who benefit from it, rather than shutting down entire economies (Brooks, 2002). Nevertheless, their effectiveness remains debatable, as Fathollah-Nejad (2014, p.49) commented “smart bombs may well succeed smart sanctions”. Agbonifo (2017, p.66) classifies the effectiveness of sanctions under three main goals: *coercing* (the extent to which sanctions modify the target’s proscribed behaviour); *constraining* (the extent to which sanctions limit the target’s ability to continue its proscribed behaviour); and *signalling* (the extent to which the target and others are stigmatized about violation of international norms).

There is considerable empirical evidence that sanctions disproportionately affect politically weak and vulnerable groups (e.g. workers, women, children) and benefit supporters of the target regime (Kaempfer, Lowenberg, & Mertens, 2004; Drury & Peksen, 2014). For instance, in research that highlights the potential impacts of sanctions on the SDGs, Neuenkirch and Neumeier (2015) reported that sanctions restrict the trade and economic development of targeted countries, negatively affect their GDP growth rate, bilateral trade and financial services which, in turn, negatively affects vulnerable groups in the sanctioned countries through increased inflation, poverty and income inequality and shortage of food and medicine.

Although the sanctioning of countries is seemingly conceived and promoted as a gender neutral act, empirical studies suggest that the most vulnerable populations, including women, are negatively affected by sanctions regimes and that they bear the burden of sanctions (Buck, Gallant & Nossal, 1998; Drury & Peksen, 2014; Gutmann, Neuenkirch, & Neumeier, 2019). Drury and Peksen (2014) argue that the costs of trade sanctions are disproportionately imposed on women, who are often already one of the most marginalized and political and economic actors in the target country, with women’s social, political, and economic rights substantially affected (Gutmann et al., 2019). Despite this, surprisingly, very few works have been focused on the gendered implications of sanctions.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no study that has previously examined the consequences of economic sanction on tourism peace-building capacity. Furthermore, the literature fails to examine how sanctions contribute to sustainability given that they disproportionately affect the wider population. This will be discussed in the following sections.

## **2.2. Sanctions and SDGs**

Economic sanctions place severe constraints on the economic development of sanctioned countries which are also mainly developing countries (Cortright & Lopez, 2018). These barriers potentially negatively impact the targeted countries' efforts to meet the SDGs. Achieving the SDGs requires finance and economic development, multilateral trade and international investment. Goal 17 emphasizes the integration of poor and developing countries in the global economy and strengthening the multilateral trading system (UN, 2015). Although the conceptualisation of the SDGs has been criticised for their reinforcement of contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Hall, 2019), sanctions are clearly barriers for state-industry partnerships and the SDGs as they are constituted. Ironically, even the UN which is a leading actor in the imposition of sanctions, states that the imposition of economic sanctions “negatively affects socio-economic development of the target countries and weaken the contribution of target countries to international economic development “ (Afshari, 2019).

In addition to economic impacts, sanctions have longstanding ramifications for the environment, which is an often-overlooked consequence of sanctions. While sanctions are not the main cause of sanctioned countries' environmental problems, they intensify the situation (Rustler, 2019). The latter is in contrast with the Goal 15 of the SDGs which calls for “protecting, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”. (UN, 2015). For instance, because of their impact on the transfer of funds and the movement of people, sanctions against Iran reduced capacity for biodiversity conservation (Madani, 2014).

Under sanctions the cooperation, coordination and sharing of responsibilities by the international community as enshrined in Goal 17 of the SDGs becomes restricted. This can lead, for example, to limited access to international scientific and educational expertise and, even, publishers (Mozafari, 2016; Seyfi, Hall, & Kuhzady, 2019). Similarly, the US government has put pressure on European or foreign entities providing technological support for cultural conservation in Iran (Seyfi, Hall & Fagnoni, 2019). This is again in contrast with target 11.4 of Goal 11 of the SDGs which calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. The financial restrictions caused by sanctions (e.g. foreign investment ban, transfer of technology) affect numerous sectors in target countries. Thus, sanctions potentially lock countries into unsustainable practices that cut across many of the SDGs and which can adversely affect the socio-economic and environmental quality of life, including health, for generations (Rustler, 2019).

### ***2.3. Peace through tourism and sanctions***

Tourism is “as much a political terrain as a cultural practice” (Germann Molz, 2010). The mobility of people across national boundaries has political implications (Bærenholdt, 2013), which sometimes can be manipulated by government for geopolitical purposes as an instrument of political leverage between nations. One notable example of mobility restrictions was the trade embargo against the apartheid regime in South Africa which included restrictions on travel, notably on overflying and landing rights for South African airlines (Pirie, 1990). The longstanding US sanctions and embargo against Cuba is another noteworthy example of

sanctions restriction on mobility which significantly affects US citizens and residents wishing to visit Cuba as well as sanctions against cruise lines (Gordon, 2016). More recently, the executive order signed by President Trump known as the Trump travel ban placed stringent restrictions on travel to the US for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen and placed restrictions on visa renewals for an additional 38 countries (Arafa, 2018). In addition, there are also specific travel bans on individuals and institutions in target countries (Seyfi & Hall, 2020a; 2019a).

International and domestic tourism flows require peace, safety and security (WTTC, 2016). There has been much rhetoric about tourism's role in promoting world peace (Hall, 2005; Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013b). One view advocates tourism's potential capability in fostering and sustaining peace. This can be seen in the global tourism-related institutions discourse of the WTTC (2016) and the UNWTO (2018) that highlight the transformative power of tourism to contribute to peace through the improvement of human relations. The role of tourism in establishing peace is reported in numerous studies (D'Amore, 1988; Moufakkir, & Kelly, 2010; Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013b; Becken & Carmignani, 2016; Farmaki, 2017; Gelbman, 2019). The contribution of tourism in reconciliation efforts in post-conflict settings has also been highlighted in cases including the Former Yugoslavia (Causevic & Lynch, 2011), Cambodia (Winter, 2008), Vietnam (Gillen, 2014), Burundi (Novelli, Morgan, & Nibigira, 2012), Cyprus (Farmaki, 2017), Korean Peninsula (Kim & Prideaux, 2003; Cho, 2007), Palestine (Isaac, 2009), Afghanistan (Durko & Petrick, 2016) and China and Taiwan (Rowen, 2014). In contrast, there is another perspective that questions the validity of the causal relationship between tourism and peace (Hall, 1994, 2005; Salazar, 2006; Pratt & Liu, 2016; Khalilzadeh, 2018). For instance, in their empirical investigation, Pratt and Liu (2016) reported that tourism is a beneficiary of peace rather than a cause of peace. Indeed, Rowen (2014) argued that tourism actually aggravates political contradictions and cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan. As Blanchard and Higgins-Desbiolles (2013a, p.2) observe, "the essential tension between the multiple dimensions of peace (as a process) and the confining dimensions of tourism (as a product) remains the invisible elephant in the room".

While existing tourism literature has opened up significant areas of inquiry pertaining to the peace and tourism nexus, knowledge is limited as to how peace through tourism is affected in countries subjected to sanctions even if tourism is not a direct object of sanctions. The following study examines such issue in the context of Iran.

### **3. Methods**

#### ***3.1. Study context***

Iran has been the subject of one of the largest, longest and toughest sanctions regime in history for almost four decades (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011; Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Dizaji, 2019), which makes it an interesting case study of sanctions and wider politics in relation to peace and tourism. The country has experienced sanctions by individual countries and international bodies since the 1979 revolution in repose to Iran's nuclear program, human rights abuses, and Iran's wider role in the region (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011; Dizaji, 2019). As of March 2020, the US had nearly 8,000 sanctions in place worldwide, with Iran by far the largest state target (Gilsinan,



2019). Four decades of sanctions have triggered a collapse in the country's economic growth, pushed the country into a deep recession with high inflation, and severed Iran's access to international markets (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018). In this section, we detail the three main stages of Iranian tourism development which show how imposition, lifting and then re-establishment of nuclear-related sanctions have paralyzed Iran's tourism and hospitality industry.

### ***Tourism in Iran before the lifting of sanctions***

The position of Iran at the crossroads of major Asian, Middle Eastern and European countries and trading routes (e.g. the Silk Road) has provide a rich heritage resource for tourism (Seyfi & Hall, 2018). Archaeology, cultural heritage, traditions, and natural heritage are among the key reasons attracting inbound visitors (Khodadadi, 2016). Despite this wealth of tourism resources, Iran has failed to gain a significant share of international tourism arrivals, especially when compared with similar countries in the region. While Iran was considered the top tourist destination in the Middle East during 1967–1977 (Morakabati, 2011), in the post-1979 era following Iran's Islamic Revolution, the aftermath of the Iran-Iraqi war (1980-1988) and conflict over Iran's nuclear developments which led to economic sanctions, international travel to Iran became significantly limited. However, Iran's negative image in many major tourist generating markets disguises its long history of tourism and rich heritage. This is especially significant as strengthening inbound tourism and its economic and cultural roles has been a common goal favored by various administrations in modern Iran (Mozaffari, Karimian, & Mousavi, 2017). Several other factors have inhibited Iran's tourism development comparing with its neighbors, these include political tensions with the United States, over-reliance on oil revenues, political instability and conflicts in the Middle East, and poor management (Khodadadi, 2016; Mozaffari et al., 2017; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). However, sanctions have had the greatest direct and indirect impacts of Iranian tourism industry, including bans on foreign investment in tourism and hospitality, bans on financial transactions with Iranian banks, bans on purchase of any aircraft and spare parts, and the indirect negative psychological effects of sanctions in the form of perceived insecurity and risk (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2018, 2019).

### ***Tourism in Iran in the post-sanctions era***

The partial lifting of international nuclear-related sanctions in the aftermath of the Iran's nuclear agreement in 2015 (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) had a strong positive impact on the Iranian tourism sector (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018) and substantially improved the country's image from being a 'pariah state' to a 'booming destination' (Khodadadi, 2016; Ghaderi et al., 2018). More than five million foreign tourists visited Iran in 2017, almost three times as many as in 2009 (UNWTO, 2019). In the light of the relaxation of sanctions and the release of pent-up international demand, European airlines such as Air France, British Airways, and Lufthansa resumed direct flights to the country. The Iranian authorities also relaxed visa requirements. Iran ordered nearly 200 aircraft from Airbus, Boeing and ATR, worth \$36 billion (Khodadadi, 2018). There was also considerable foreign investment in the hotel industry. For example, in 2016, the French group Accor Hotels became the first foreign-branded hotel to open in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and Spain's Melia Hotels International opened a beach resort hotel on the Caspian Sea. Iran also made significant

investments in high-speed rail in collaboration with the Italian company, Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane (FS). In their analysis of economic impact of the lifting of sanctions to tourism and the wider economy in Iran, Pratt and Alizadeh (2018) concluded that tourism development provided a boost to the overall economy with the extra income stimulating investment. Iran's tourism administration hoped to attract more than twenty million tourists by 2025 thereby creating jobs for millions of unemployed young Iranians (Ghaderi et al., 2018). The increase in the number of arrivals and the subsequent employment generation and increases income, also had many positive effects on the empowerment of women who could work in tourism and hospitality related businesses in Iran's religio-patriarchal society (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018).

### ***Tourism in Iran and the re-imposition of sanctions***

The US withdrawal of the agreement and the reestablishment of sanctions in May 2018 halted Iran's booming tourist industry. This latest round of sanctions imposed by the Trump administration are part of a "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at reducing oil exports (which account for over 80% of the state budget) to zero in order to curb Iran's regional influence (Dizaji, 2019). Following the return of American sanctions, several airlines suspended their flights to Iran, and foreign investors were obliged to leave Iran due to being blacklisted by US sanctions and the fear of losing access to the US market. Although getting access to new commercial aircraft and spare parts for existing old aircraft was one of Iran's key reasons to reach an agreement with the U.S. and Europe to lift sanctions, Iran only received five airplanes out of the nearly 200 ordered. US sanctions also prevented Iranian carriers from purchasing spare parts which further worsened the airworthiness of Iran's ageing air fleet.

The renewed sanctions also affected the mobility of individuals visiting Iran. US sanctions restricts visa-free entry to the US for travelers who have visited Iran. Travel warnings for Iran were reestablished by European countries and major online travel platforms halted their services in Iran. Overall, Iranian tourism is plagued by sanctions and growing tensions between Iran and the United States which shows how the country's tourism industry is directly and indirectly impacted by geopolitical issues which severely affect any attempts for peace through tourism.

### ***3.2. Data collection***

The aim of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding on the effects of sanctions on Iran's tourism industry as perceived by various stakeholders and their relationship to peace and the SDGs. An exploratory qualitative research approach was adopted to collect and analyse the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the exploratory nature of this study, the semi-structured interview was deemed appropriate for data collection. This method allowed the researchers to delve into what each research participant had in mind (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and provided opportunities for each interviewee to explore the issues they felt were important about the topics given to the participants.

Purposive sampling was used as it allows researchers to use their judgement and their a-priori understanding of the topic, to select people who better help them to answer their research questions and achieve their goals (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) in a sensitive political environment (Hall, 2011). After analyzing existing stakeholder and sanctions research (Perks,

2013; Seyfi & Hall, 2019a, 2019b), participants in this study were selected from the public sector and national authorities, the private sector, non-profit organization and academia, the latter having a close relationship to the tourism industry in Iran. Further interviewees were identified by snowball sampling when those first contacted were asked to identify others who may be interested in doing an interview. The informants were carefully chosen to represent different sectors of the industry and allow for enriched views.

The views of the following informants are presented in the study: five tour operators/agent, the owners of four hotels, the managers of two hotels, two airline managers/staff, four tour guides, three persons from the national tourism administration, three persons from provincial tourism organizations, two persons from the national hotelier association, two persons from the national travel agent's association, three persons from a local handicraft association, two persons from a NGO, and four tourism academics. A pilot study was conducted with four interviewees to test the interview questions, along with interview style and approach (Kim, 2011). The interviews took place from June to August 2019. The recorded interviews were thirty to sixty minutes in duration with the questions being framed according to the objectives of the research and included questions related to the effects of the sanctions on the tourism industry prior to the conclusion of the nuclear agreement, how the lifting of sanctions helped to flourish the tourism-related businesses, the effects of the US withdrawal from the agreement and the subsequent reestablishment of sanctions and inhibiting factors, and how tourism continues to operate under a sanctions environment. The general aim in the interviews was to see through the participants' eyes by having them explain their experiences.

The interview questions were open-ended in order to obtain more spontaneous opinions and to avoid potential bias limiting responses to the researcher's fixed categories (Rowley, 2012). Because Iranian officials are often reluctant to talk openly about political issues, interviews were conducted anonymously, we also sought to ensure the confidentiality and identity of our respondents (Farasatkah, Ghazi, & Bazargan, 2008). Those who did not wish to be interviewed in person were offered the option of a telephone or email interview. Where possible, unstructured follow-up probes were used to further discuss points emerged during the interview. According to Patton (2005) the sample size in a qualitative survey depends mainly on data saturation, the possibility of reaching the target sample, resources and available time. Interviews were conducted up to theoretical saturation. After interviewing 36 participants, the theoretical level of data saturation achieved as the last interviews did not yield any new information.

### ***3.3. Data analysis***

As the vast majority of participants spoke only Persian, the interviews were conducted in that language. The data were analysed in Persian and only the final results were translated into English. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and were back translated into English by the lead author to ensure consistency in meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and were eventually verified by the second researcher. Following every interview, a preliminary analysis was conducted until all the interviews had ended. To secure trustworthiness, respondents were provided a copy of their interview transcript, and feedback was sought to enhance the

dependability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Frame analysis was used to analyze the data to identify themes in the text utilizing a coding scheme to organize emerging topics into interrelated themes (Talja, 1999). The analytical process included primarily the identification, analysis and reporting of themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts and notes from the interviews were read and re-read a number of times to further familiarise with the data as well as identifying key themes and concurrent patterns both within and among interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Verbatim spoken words from the transcripts were then copied, re-organised, and cross-referenced to classify the thematic groups. After several rounds of coding, topics emerging from the data were clustered into interrelated themes, followed by subcategories that allowed greater consistency in structure and development on key issues (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011).

#### **4. Findings**

This section deals with the constraints that the sanctions have imposed on Iranian tourism actors, particularly on the private sector. The different stakeholders interviewed discussed the constraints of imposed economic sanctions on the tourism sector and the challenges they have faced so far. As noted above, sanctions have multiple effects on the tourism sector. Overall, the findings show how the imposition, relaxation and then re-imposition of sanctions have paralyzed the tourism industry and related businesses in Iran.

##### **4.1. Psychological effects**

###### ***Destination risk perception***

In recent decades, due to political instability and Iran's geopolitical ambitions, international media coverage of Iran has had a negative impact on foreign tourist arrivals. A majority of respondents agreed that the country's negative image has made it a perceived high-risk destination for foreign travelers. Respondents believed that many factors shaped this negative image including 'the 1979 revolution', and 'the American hostage crisis and subsequent sanctions regime' which gave birth to a 'doctrine of anti-American sentiment and Americanophobia' among the Iranian ruling elite. They also mentioned 'the Iranian nuclear programme' which has been the main reason for many of sanctions as well as the source of many tensions between Iran and the west. As one respondent commented "the negative image of Iran is widespread in the international media... many countries warn their citizens not to visit Iran (interview #11)". This was echoed by another respondent who explained the mental effects of sanctions on destination image and commented that:

...the negative and psychological dimension of the sanctions [perception] has created a negative image of Iran in the minds of foreign travellers... this image would make them look for another destination than Iran... Security is one of the most important factors in the formulation of tourism development strategies in the world. Security and tourism are

parameters of an equation that are directly and closely linked... as long as Iran's security is threatened by sanctions, we will suffer the consequences (interview #14)

This was echoed by a tour operator:

...a tourist usually goes to a country where security is not threatened. It is true that Iran is a safe country in the Middle East, but we only feel the situation ourselves. The Western media and even Asian media refer to Iran as a country in crisis that will soon experience internal conflict or war (interview #16)

Respondents all agree that the nuclear agreement of 2015 and the subsequent lifting of sanctions largely contributed to changing Iran's image, leading to a substantial increase in the number of arrivals, especially European tourists, and an increase in foreign investment in tourism. A tour operator involved with inbound tours noted that:

the nuclear deal has resulted in the restoration of Iran's image against negative coverage in the foreign media. This could be observed in international newspapers dealing with Iran and on online travel sites such as Tripadvisor, Lonely Planet, etc.. (Interview #19)

Looking at the media headlines at that time, it is clear how important a nuclear deal and the lifting of sanction were in changing Iran's image. For example, just as the nuclear deal was announced, CNN published a report entitled "why your next vacation could be in Iran" (Pleitgen, 2015), citing the Iranian government's attention to the importance of the tourism sector by opening the country to more tourists.

The impact of this positive image cannot be underestimated, given that, for example, the number of German tourists increased by 54% and Italian tourists by 75% (Seyfi & Hall, 2018). But following the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear agreement and the ensuing tensions, Iran was again castigated by the media, damaging its international image. This was noted by a respondent:

the Vienna Agreement was very promising and positive in the first year, but the withdrawal of the US from this agreement has again increased risk and fear for tourists wishing to visit Iran... This has created new challenges for the Iranian tourism industry... Although the cost of travel to Iran has decreased by 50% [ mainly due to the devaluation of the currency as a result of sanctions], the number of European and American tourists arriving in the country since Trump's exit has largely decreased (interview #8).

### ***Cancellation and reduction of visits***

Most responders stated that they have experienced the cancellation of visits and the decline in arrivals of foreign tourists because of sanctions. Tour operators were the main industry group

adversely affected by sanctions. For most respondents, trip cancellation is the first reaction of foreign travelers to the sanctions imposed on Iran. A tour guide explained:

Soon after the reinstatement of sanctions and rising tensions between Iran and the US, austerity measures were stepped up. International companies, such as Booking.com, had just started working with Iran, but immediately left the country when Trump launched the first wave of sanctions on Iran, other popular travel agencies did the same and they no longer sell Iranian travel tours in their packages... (interview #5).

This echoes the words of another tour guide:

At present, only a few small companies sell limited tours but are not interested in expanding the market and will soon eliminate all Iranian tours from their websites. Immediately after the US withdrawal from the agreement, several tours from France, China and Germany to Iran were cancelled... We're just guides and we live off the money we make from tourists... it means that my life and the lives of my colleagues are seriously affected (interview #6).

A closer look at international websites offering tours shows that Iran's name has been removed. One hotel owner noted:

A few years ago, Iranian tour operators could still operate on [TourRadar], but this site also removed all Iranian packages following the imposition of sanctions. With the imposition of sanctions, booking requests from foreign agencies have been drastically reduced and our business is no longer profitable (interview #9).

### ***Reduction in foreign investment***

With the lifting of international sanctions in 2015, Iran sought to convince foreign investors to invest in various service sectors through the use of incentives such as 'a five-year tax exemption' for those investing in tourism-related infrastructure. The respondents from the hotel sector stated that the country has a great potential for hotel sector. One of the respondents suggested that:

The lifting of sanctions had some major benefits for our tourism industry. we had a foreign brand hotel chain for the first time after the revolution. ... But with the return of American sanctions against our country, the Accor group's contract faced with new constraints and new plans were eventually canceled (interview #4).

He further stated that international hotel chains such as Rotana (an Emirati hotel management company), and Marriott International had expressed their desire to enter the Iranian market and build new hotels. But the return of sanctions changed meant that these contracts were never signed. This was also echoed by a five-star hotel manager:

...with US sanctions against Iran, it is not legally possible for foreign hotel chains to enter the Iranian market at the moment. ...the sanctions prevented investors from taking advantage of investor confidence in the hotel sector and the construction of new Iranian hotels (interview #13).

## **4.2. Sectoral effects**

### ***Aviation***

The Iranian aviation industry has experienced serious problems with regard to airplane components and airplane purchases as sanctions have targeted Iran's purchase of any aircraft as well as parts. Thus, the sector is clearly experiencing operational difficulties directly and indirectly related to the sanctions. The respondents drew attention to various points concerning the impact of sanctions on the Iranian aviation industry. For instance, an airline official explains that: "The average age of the Iranian airline fleet is over 30 years. After decades of sanctions Americans have blocked any possibility of modernization of the air fleet" ... Iranian airlines have suffered grave deterioration in their safety record due to sanctions" (interview #25). This echoed a colleague's view who stated: "Given the sanctions on Iran, it is only possible to import second-hand aircraft into the country." (interview #26).

Iranian civil aviation has long been subject to U.S, UN, and European operational restrictions and sanctions that bar the provision of parts and technical services to Iranian aircraft. One of the respondents commented:

...some airports even refused to refuel Iranian planes, forcing them to travel with heavier fuel loads. Sanctions target the provision of fuel to all Iranian airlines at international airports.... many flights experience delays or cancelations" (interview #25).

A tour operator involved with outbound travel mentioned that Iranian airlines are banned from flying to major European countries such as France and Germany:

In our tour package, we have to use flights by regional airlines such as Turkish Airlines or Qatar Airways. We have no choice of having direct flight to main European capitals, have to use short alternative routes. Some of our customers who are old, mainly refuse such indirect flights" (interview #33).

### ***Online booking system ban***

Booking.com, the Dutch online travel booking platform giant, is another company that entered the Iranian market after the sanctions were lifted but has since left, with adverse effects on hotels (interview #34). One tour operator noted that: "The listing of Iranian hotels on Booking.com had many advantages, as tourists could easily book their hotels and this could encourage them to travel to Iran and make their package themselves" (interview #36). Another hotelier noted: "The accommodation on this website is in itself a good marketing tool and this opportunity could be an advantage for the country's tourism industry" (interview #35). But following the US withdrawal from the agreement, Booking.com announced that it was no

longer possible for them to continue with Iranian partners because of US sanctions. As a result, there is no reservation system or platform for tourists who decide to travel to Iran. A travel agency manager explains:

almost all foreign companies involved in tourism marketing and promotion are not interested in working with Iranian partners. It's simple, they can't afford to miss the opportunity to work with the huge American tourism market" (interview #31).

### ***Financial services restrictions***

One of the notable financial effects of sanctions that was repeatedly commented by the interviewees is the ban and restriction on international payments systems and the banking industry. The country has no connection to international payment networks such as Visa and MasterCard. An interviewee commented:

Because of the sanctions, it's impossible to transfer any money to Iran or transfer money from Iran to other countries from official banking channels...we have to go through the exchanges offices which have bureaus in Dubai, Istanbul for any international transactions. they always ask for a high commission rate for any transaction (interview #18).

A tour guide also explains:

Tourists have to carry cash for duration of stay if they want to visit Iran. They can't use their bank card in Iran... imagine how hard and risky it is for senior tourists which make up the largest market for our inbound tourism... I have had many problems with this, and our customers always complain about this (interview #15).

### **4.3. Mobility restrictions**

#### ***Tightening of the visa procedure for Iranians***

Iranian passports are at the bottom of the world ranking of the most powerful passports. According to the 2019 Henley Passport Index (HPI), Iran ranks 101<sup>st</sup> out of 109 countries, together with North Korea, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Eritrea for a total of only 39 easily accessible destinations (Henley & Partners, 2019), making it difficult to travel abroad with an Iranian passport. As a result, Iranians have to undertake visa application procedures through embassies to travel abroad well in advance. One tour operator explains:

... we have had many problems with the visa application process over the last years because of sanctions. Visa applicants have faced delays in payment, unilateral and unjustified cancellations, or a lack of responsiveness and availability of embassy officials in Iran. For example, applying for a visa to Germany from Iran currently takes about nine months... embassies, however, do not refund the visa fee if the visa is not granted (interview #32).



Respondents complained about the lengthy visa process. A tour operator involved in outbound tourism to Europe stated that:

with the return of sanctions, the number of applications dropped and the process became even more difficult. So many visa applications are rejected, services require applicants to come back to the embassy several times, others want to add fingerprints to the files (interview #34).

Most importantly, this process is not transparent (interview #29). This situation has led Iranian civilian activists to launch campaigns for the "right to travel", as well as a "visa stories" site (*visastory.ir*), so that everyone can write and publish their experiences of visa applications

### ***Halting direct and charter flights***

Soon after the US return of sanctions on Iran, major European airlines including British Airways, and Air France-KLM along with other airlines such as Etihad Airways and Thai Airways all withdrew from Iran. The new round of sanctions targeted global business links with Iran, and companies doing business with Iran are subject to being barred from the US market. This has substantially affected the airline capacity to and from Iran. A tour operator noted that:

In the first phase, direct flights have become indirect flights...airlines are slowly leaving Iran, and European airlines have been replaced by regional airlines such as Qatar Airways or Turkish Airlines (interview #32).

Another respondent also noted:

With the rise in currency prices, flight prices have been calculated based on the free market exchange rate which are always fluctuating...sometimes we have to ask customers to pay back the differences in price (interview #30).

## **4.4. Societal effects**

### ***Decline in purchasing power***

Economic sanctions have substantially weakened the purchasing power of Iranians. This has led to dramatic increase in inflation and unemployment. Several respondents commented that sanctions have greatly changed travel habits among Iranians, including to friends and relatives. An accommodation manager stated:

the sanctions have made Iranians avoid long stays in destinations. They are no longer able to travel. Given the increasing cost of travel in Iran, Iranians tend to make day trips, not more (interview #12).

This was echoed by another respondent:

...Tourists who had travelled abroad before the economic crisis and currency fluctuations are now turning to local destinations. As for the middle classes, they were already accustomed to travelling locally, and today's rising costs have almost completely eliminated this option from the household basket (interview #15).

### ***Gender disempowerment***

Because of their already vulnerable position in the Iran's male-dominated socio-political culture, women faced more socio-economic hardships from the reimposition of sanctions, and job security and opportunities for women have decreased (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018). Respondents believe that the effects of sanctions on Iranian women have been substantial. This was observed by a female tour guide:

By the return of sanctions, women are the first to lose their jobs and have less job security as compared to men... sanctions endangered women's livelihoods and deprive women of their job security and I've seen many cases of layoffs among my friends over the last year (interview #20).

This was echoed by another respondent:

Sanctions have created a situation that women accept work without any social security insurance by the employer... this economic pain can be felt in a number of ways such as less well paid job in the hotel and other lodging sector, less job security, no support from the government without no safeguards... all of these worsen women's economic status in Iran (interview #21).

### **Discussion**

Sanctions are promoted as a means to achieve peace (Mack & Khan, 2000; Brzoska, 2015; Lorenz, 2019). However, the history of sanctions clearly shows that economic sanctions have not been able to maintain peace in the long-term. The analysis of Hufbauer, Schott, Elliott, and Oeggm (2008) reveal that only 34% of economic sanctions imposed between 1914 and 1990 achieved their goals. This was also observed by Smeets (2019) who notes that sanctions episodes continue to be a popular foreign policy tool 'despite the fact that the literature does not present conclusive evidence that economic sanctions are an effective policy instrument'.

With respect to Iran, while it is possible that sanctions may have restricted some of the geopolitical ambitions of Iran's conservative theocrats, the war by proxy between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as other Iranian actions in the Middle East suggest that sanctions have not led to peace by proxy in the region (Saad, 2019; Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020). Therefore, any notion of peace that such sanctions have served should be regarded as highly restrictive. As noted by Ali (2019), the longstanding sanctions have caused great difficulties for Iranian civilians, that calling into question the legitimacy and efficacy of sanctions regimes.

The removal of many sanctions following the 2015 nuclear agreement and the boost this gave tourism provided massive impetus for employment generation, especially for women and younger people; helped justify environmental and heritage conservation measures; and improve the quality of life in many destinations. In such a situation peace without sanctions was extremely conducive to meeting many of the SDGs, particularly in areas, such as gender and women's rights, where the conservative elements within Iranian state have extremely narrow perspectives (Shahidian, 2002; Tahmasbi, 2018). The comments of respondents as to the effects of the reimposition of sanctions on tourism to and within Iran provides significant insights into the peace and tourism relationship. Peace, in the sense of the absence of all-out war, by itself is insufficient to encourage tourism and tourism developments that meet broader sustainability goals. Instead, sanctions that are usually justified in the name of peace although often reflecting national political agendas, can have awful consequences on the wellbeing of the general population and especially the most vulnerable (Gottstein, 1999; Koc, Jernigan & Das, 2007; Drury & Peksen, 2014; Kim, 2019). As the findings of this study shows sanctions have negatively affected the welfare and populace and life of ordinary people and those working in the tourism and hospitality industry. This is important as the empowerment of women through tourism has been made more fragile with the return of sanctions. This is in line with other findings that economic decline caused by the sanctions leads to greater economic grievance often met by further government repression (Buck et al., 1998; Drury & Peksen, 2014; Kim, 2019; Gutmann et al., 2019). This may undermine civil society 's capacity to criticize the target government and contradict the very notion of sanctions as a non-violent tool of statecraft.

Rather than punish or restrict ruling elites, sanctions affect society as a whole, and often with results at odds with the stated intentions of the sanctions (Nossal, 1989; Peksen, 2009; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Such barriers can have a detrimental effect on the efforts of the target developing countries to achieve the SDGs, and demonstrates a strong contrast with the goals laid out in the SDGs. As the findings of the study shows sanctions have negatively affected the middle class who are arguably the main consumers of tourism services. The results here support Peksen's (2009) observation that economic coercion via the impositions of sanctions remains a counterproductive policy tool. As such, a peace through sanctions approach clearly does not appear to contribute to the SDGs. As noted earlier, achieving SDGs requires finance and economic development, multilateral trade, and international investment, which all can be undermined with the imposition of sanctions. While, Goal 17 stresses the inclusion of developing countries into the world economy and the expansion of the multilateral trading mechanism in order to achieve the SDGs, arguably as the result of this study revealed, economic sanctions hindered such capacities by putting ban on financial transactions and foreign investment in the target countries, in a way that the countries subjected to sanction have left isolated from the global community ( Ghaderi et al., 2018; Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Ali, 2019; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). This can also be seen in the case of Cuba sanctions regime where the US has strongly restricted US business and third country investment in different sectors of Cuban economy including tourism and hospitality (Gordon, 2016).

Instead, what is required is an understanding of peace in which the vital role of social, economic and environmental justice is recognised along with human rights (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; 2008; 2018; Isaac & Hodge, 2011; Jamal & Camargo, 2014; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Importantly, this observation extends to both sanctions and the role of tourism as tourism itself can be used to support authoritarian and despotic regimes with little real commitment to development endeavours such as the SDGs (Hall, 1994; Cortright & Lopez, 2018; Boluk et al., 2019). Instead, the notion of empowerment through tourism is replaced by disempowerment via the imposition of sanctions. In Iran this is particularly significant for women's economic empowerment which is central to realizing women's rights and gender equality and to the achievement of the SDGs (UN Women, 2020). While, tourism has been viewed as a sector capable of advancing gender equality and women's empowerment (Cole, 2006; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Alarcón & Cole, 2019) as it is also enshrined in SDG5 which focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment (Boluk et al., 2019), nonetheless, as the findings of this study also showed, the economic disruption ensuing from sanctions are detrimental to such empowerment capacity of tourism.

In the right circumstances, tourism can contribute to peace and peace to tourism. However, it is vital that the role of geopolitical measures, such as sanctions, and their impacts on SDGs indicators stop being ignored by international institutions and organisations, such as the UNWTO, as well as by tourism researchers. The growing popularity of sanctions as a coercive geopolitical choice of foreign policy clearly has implications with respect to the discourse on peace through tourism. As the findings of this study indicated, economic sanctions disrupt financial investment and supply chains in destinations exposed to sanctions and highlight how any tourism development is related to politics and geopolitics (Hall, 1994, 2017; Kim & Prideaux, 2003; Rowen, 2014; Farmaki et al., 2015). As such, this study shows that sanctions imposed by major powers on, usually developing countries negatively affect the peace-building capacity of tourism and in turn generate more depression and conflict. Furthermore, if we take another step back, we can observe that not only is the impositions of sanctions on Iran and its subsequent implications for the Iranian people steeped in politics but so too is the very framing of the notion of tourism-through-peace (Cho, 2007; Scott, 2012; Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013b) and, we would also suggest, the SDGs (Boluk et al., 2019; Hall, 2019).

The current research would also suggest that any contribution of tourism to reconciliation needs to be understood in the specific context of the initial conflict that requires resolution. While government relations remained restrained the short period of the lifting of sanctions did suggest something of tourism's transformative economic potential and the opportunity for international visitors to see Iran and the Iranian people first-hand. Indeed, the contribution of sanctions to the impacts of COVID-19 in Iran may only serve to exacerbate tensions.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the post-Cold War period, economic sanctions have become a popular response to myriad threats to international peace and security, yet the peacebuilding or peacekeeping capacity of

this foreign policy tool is highly questionable. In his review of the sanctions' regimes on Cuba, former Yugoslavia and Iraq, Gottstein (2007) concluded that sanctions inexorably end up hurting the people, not the ruling elite. This research on Iran suggests the same outcome. Sanctions neither produce nor restore peace.

Since the establishment of an Islamic republic in 1979, tourism in Iran has been plagued by political instability and decades of sanctions. Although sanctions have long been used as a foreign policy instrument by states and international actors such as the United Nations Security Council and the European Union, there is relatively little research that examines the tourism consequences of sanctions on a given destination and in relation to peace and sustainability. This study showed how the imposition, lifting and reestablishment of sanctions has affected the Iranian tourism industry, creating a business environment in which though peaceful, fails to fulfill tourism's potential promise as a mechanism to facilitate the SDGs.

The study's value lies in two distinctive contributions. First, it expands the peace-through-tourism discourse by highlights the role of sanctions as an important yet rarely explored phenomenon in tourism and peace literature. Despite the increasing growth of sanctions, very limited research has examined peace through sanctions and its relation to tourism and wider implication for the SDGs. Second, it reinforces the notion that a far more nuanced idea of peace is required for peace and tourism research, one that focuses on concerns over human rights, socio-economic and environmental justice and security, rather than the relative absence of violence. It is in both these areas that future research is urgently needed.

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