

Challenges, Drivers and Key Factors Affecting Iranian Tourism from the Perspective of International Relations

Morteza Fallahnezhad, Afshin Zargar* , Fakhreddin Soltani

Department of International Relations, Ka. C., Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran.

*Corresponding author: a.zargar@kiaau.ac.ir

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Abstract:

Today, tourism sector is one of the important economic sectors. Iran, as a country with high tourism potential, faces various challenges. Among them, the decline in international relations and political-economic sanctions can be considered as the most important challenges in Iran's foreign tourism sector. Accordingly, the main goal of this research is to identify the existing challenges, drivers, and key factors from the perspective of international relations. The present study is descriptive-exploratory in nature. The statistical population consists of experts who are familiar with the topic of international relations and tourism, among 100 people who were selected as the research sample using the snowball method. Moreover, for validating the research instrument, content analysis was used; for its reliability, the test-retest method was applied; and for data analysis, Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis were utilized. In this regard, the research results show that among the 15 initially identified factors, 5 factors achieved a CVR coefficient above 0.75 in the content validity assessment and were identified as the final influential factors on tourism. Ultimately, the categorization of these factors showed that the five factors-foreign investment in the development of tourism infrastructure; advertising in the media and virtual space; war and conflict; sanctions; and the JCPOA-having high driving power and low dependence, are the key and influential factors on Iran's tourism.

Keywords: International relations; Iran's tourism; Interpretive structural modeling (ISM); MICMAC; Tourism challenges; Tourism drivers

Introduction

Today, one of the important economic sectors is the tourism sector. The tourism industry accounts for 10 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) worldwide and is responsible for one in every ten jobs globally (World Tourism Organization). Many recent studies indicate that tourism is one of the most important growing sectors for enhancing a country's economic growth rate. The role of tourism development in the economy was first raised in the 1970s. The development of tourism in enhancing the economic growth rate has usually been accompanied by increased foreign exchange income and employment in tourism areas (Zarei, 2020).

According to the World Tourism Organization (2018), the number of international tourists (overnight visitors) worldwide in 2018 reached 6 percent, and the income generated from it totaled \$1.4 trillion across all global destinations. This figure was double the organization's earlier prediction for the year 2010. The share of tourism revenue in global GDP was reported as 7% globally, 10% in the Middle East and Africa, 6% in Europe and Oceania each,

and 3% in America (Gilsinan, 2019).

The tourism system is an open system that interacts and engages with external factors and is influenced by them. One of the important characteristics of the tourism system is feedback. On the other hand, Berrakat and Medlik are among the researchers who identified specific characteristics for tourism, the first and most important of which is that tourism is a combination of impacts and relations. Therefore, it can be said that the tourism sector inherently possesses two institutionalized elements: influence and relationship. Conversely, governments have numerous political and economic goals that influence the nature of policies and, consequently, their implementation. Policymaking in the tourism industry varies widely depending on the political, economic, and cultural structures of each country. This variation determines the degree of government involvement in this process in each country (Heydari and Rahmati, 2013).

Tourism contributes to the approximation of international relations, and to the cultural, civilizational, and economic relations of different countries around the world, especially

neighboring countries. This participation leads to support for peace, security, and stability among nations. Tourism also contributes to presenting the reality of countries and societies to the world in order to gain and enhance status and strengthen global discernment to achieve political positions. Today, tourism has become the primary medium covering international relations. Additionally, tourism is one of the most economic and social sectors in the world, playing a prominent role in the development of countries and the international community in defining the scope of relations among countries (Al-Saadi, 2014).

Among tourism industry professionals, there is a belief that tourism can reduce political tensions. As the concept of a global village emerges and borders—both mental and actual—dissolve, tourism can act as a facilitator of global peace. This is because the tourism industry and countries with tourism-dependent economies are obliged to create a secure, reassuring, and peaceful environment—key elements for the prosperity of this sector—for tourists (World Tourism Organization (WTO), 1997).

The use of the term “tourism” in the literature of international communities and the policies surrounding tourism and its development has always been dynamic and evolving over time, which itself is evidence of the mutual influence between tourism and international politics (Olender, 2018). Since international relations is a branch of political science and tourism constitutes a significant part of the economy, it can thus be stated that there is a close connection between international relations and tourism, stemming from the clear overlap between political and economic conditions—especially in situations where tourism is part of the economic sector of many countries seeking to improve their economies through agreements, treaties, and challenges to achieve economic policy development. Furthermore, there is a reciprocal effect between international relations and tourism (Al-Saadi, 2014). The field of international relations includes multiple components, some of which are closely connected to the development of the tourism industry. Additionally, having a positive image on the international stage enables any country to increase the number of foreign tourists. A country perceived as unsafe in the international community will not be able to attract tourists. On the other hand, the tourism industry’s influence on the international stage is such that countries with a high number of tourists cannot be misrepresented by biased media campaigns, because tourists themselves, having visited the country, disseminate accurate information through media and virtual platforms (Malakouti, 2020).

A country’s foreign relations are influenced by various internal and external factors, which can impact all domestic sectors and industries, such as tourism. Conversely, the tourism sector—by virtue of its developmental dependency—affects a country’s international interactions and relations (Zarei, 2020). There are numerous examples of this: Turkey, Iran’s neighboring country, with which it shares cultural, geographical, and value-based similarities, is a suitable example of the reciprocal role between tourism development and foreign relations. By attracting 42 million tourists in 2014, Turkey ranked sixth globally in foreign tourist

growth and 16th in the global tourism ranking, turning into one of the successful development experiences of the past two decades through relatively successful foreign relations. However, the emergence of a coup led to a 40 percent drop in American tourists between 2015 and 2017, and popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt caused a 30 percent decline in international tourists in those countries. This reflects the principle that foreign policy plays a vital role in executing tourism policies worldwide (Malakouti, 2020).

Iran, as one of the ten countries with the highest tourism potential, possesses opportunities and capacities for tourism development. Nevertheless, it faces restraining forces and challenges, such as broad sanctions by the U.S. and its allies, including the Security Council, which have blocked the path toward achieving economic agreements. The boycott of Iranian banks and insurance institutions has caused problems in the inflow and outflow of foreign currency and international travel services. Additionally, negative Western propaganda against Iran has distorted tourists’ perceptions of the country (Snell, 2015).

It should be noted that by 2019, the United States had issued nearly 8,000 sanctions worldwide, and Iran has been the primary governmental target of U.S. sanctions (Gilsinan, 2019).

The aforementioned set of issues has led Iran’s tourism sector to be affected by international relations. If these limitations and challenges persist, we will witness a further weakening of Iran and its tourism industry. This weakening will increasingly widen the gap between Iran—with all its tourist attractions—and other countries in the world (countries that may be far behind Iran in terms of tourist attractions but whose open international relations have made their tourism more developed and thriving than Iran’s). This growing gap will become harder and harder to bridge each day, signaling a bleak future. For this reason, it is necessary to examine the role of Iran’s international relations in its tourism industry and, in order to solve tourism-related issues and develop the sector from the perspective of international relations, conduct future studies and, based on the resulting scenarios, propose mechanisms for improving international relations in the tourism sector toward the 2041 horizon.

Research background

Faridzadeh et al. (2024), in a study examined the role of international cooperation in the development of the tourism industry in the city of Chabahar. The results of this article show that strengthening relations with neighboring countries and taking advantage of successful global experiences can help attract investment and increase the number of tourists in Chabahar.

Fallah Nejad (2023), in an article, examined the impact of international relations on the tourism industry of Iran with an emphasis on the sanction factor. The research results show that among the initial 36 identified factors, 10 factors were recognized in the stage of content validity assessment as the final influencing factors of sanctions on tourism. Ultimately, the categorization of these factors showed that the four factors—investment restrictions, limitations in providing

banking services, Iranophobia, and weaknesses in land and air transportation infrastructure-which have high influence power and lower dependency, are the key and influential factors of sanctions on Iran's tourism industry.

Lanjani et al. (2021), in the article "Iran's Tourism Development Strategy in the Era of Globalization and Its Consequences," concluded that tourism laws in areas such as visa issuance, customs and passenger goods regulations, vehicle transit, tourism insurance, and judicial authorities are among the most important regulations considered in developed countries but have been marginalized in our country due to international sanctions. Accordingly, the government should create the groundwork for private sector investment and foreign investors in the development of tourism infrastructure, provide necessary security for foreign travelers, and facilitate their easier entry into the country.

Malakouti (2020), in the thesis *Tourism Industry and International Relations (Case Study: Iran)*, concluded that given the conflict between Iran and the current international system, Iran politically has not been able or has not wanted to gain the trust of other governments (especially developed countries), and consequently, the citizens of these countries are not inclined to travel to Iran. Meanwhile, the perspective of Iran's rulers and managers toward tourism is a security-focused and inappropriate one, and this view has practically resulted in Iran not having an active tourism industry that could impact its relations with other countries.

Zarei (2020), in the thesis *Investigating the Role of Tourism Development in Improving Foreign Relations Based on the Turkish Model (2002-2019)*, concluded that the more tourism developed in Turkey, the more its foreign relations improved and progressed. This does not imply causality but indicates a type of correlation between the fields of tourism and foreign relations in the case of Turkey. The research results showed that the active factors in the tourism sector which could be effective in the field of foreign relations include: interaction of national values, historical and cultural contexts, the structure of the international system and its overall image, behavioral patterns in foreign relations, public opinion, and internal needs.

Çokişler and Çokişler (2023), in a conceptual review article on the relationship between tourism and peace from the perspective of international relations theories (four theories: neorealism, neoliberalism, constructivism, and critical theory), concluded that tourism promotes peace, and this feature theoretically aligns with the arguments of constructivism and neoliberalism.

Amiri et al. (2022), in a study, examined the impact of international sanctions on the development of health tourism in Iran. The results show that international sanctions directly prevent Iran from purchasing airplanes and their parts, conducting banking transactions, and so on, and indirectly-through bans on oil exports, petrochemical products, minerals, and raw metals-restrict the government's access to foreign currency. This leads to budget deficits and ultimately delays the development of infrastructure as the foundation for health tourism development, negatively affecting it and slowing its growth rate.

Prabowo and Sinaga (2020), in the article *The Role of*

Tourism in International Relations: Evidence from Indonesia's Economy, concluded that global tourism revenues, international tourism expenditures, the number of incoming and outgoing international tourists, and also industrialization, are significantly and positively related to Indonesia's international relations. Policymakers can contribute to formulating strategies to strengthen international relations by promoting global tourism.

Seifi and Hall (2019), in their study, examined *Sanctions and Tourism: Effects, Complexities, and Researches*. They concluded that each of the four main types of sanctions-financial, sectoral, diplomatic, and individual-has different consequences for tourism at various scales. These findings show that sanctions negatively impact tourism, including hospitality jobs, destination image, restriction of international travel, and disruption of financial investment and supply chains. More comprehensive sanctions may lead to significant economic and personal problems at the destination as well as indirect effects such as currency devaluation and inflationary pressures. However, despite smart and targeted sanctions, they rarely affect governments in a targeted manner and lead to political behavior change. A resistance economy may emerge in response to such sanctions, in which domestic tourism gains more importance due to reduced international mobility. Overall, studying sanctions deepens the knowledge and interrelations between geopolitics, foreign policy, tourism, and their consequences for destinations.

Theoretical foundations

Tourism

Tourism is often referred to as the world's largest industry; even if there is no consensus about the actual size of this industry, this does not create doubt about its scale. Most researchers acknowledge that tourism is highly significant in environmental, economic-social, and political outcomes. Tourism means traveling for leisure or business. The World Tourism Organization defines tourists as: "People who leave their usual environment and travel to another place for less than one consecutive year for leisure or other purposes" (Chitadze, 2023).

International tourism

Tourism is classified into various types. One of these classifications is based on internal (urban and rural) and external political territories. Foreign or international tourism means traveling to different countries and regions (beyond international borders) for sightseeing, exploration, and recreation Zarei (2020).

International relations

The Webster Dictionary defines international relations as the relationships between independent governments, which are a clear result of foreign policy and, in fact, form the field of international action and reaction. The Collins Dictionary also defines it as the relations, negotiations, and transactions between countries. The key element in the field of international relations, in addition to considering states as actors, is the inclusion of other entities such as non-state

actors, individuals, organizations, and international institutions, as well as the relationships between these actors. Therefore, in international relations, diverse processes and rules emerge that go far beyond the realm of international politics (Ghasemi, 2012). In general, it can be stated that international relations include interactions among state and non-state actors within the framework of decision-making or psychological and other factors (Zarei, 2020).

The relationship between tourism and international relations

Tourism has significant potential for presenting a positive image of nations and creating a context for harmonious and favorable relations, especially in personal interactions and also at governmental levels. Tourism can influence international relations through domestic policy processes (Prideaux et al., 2007). Points out that tourism are an inseparable part of international relations. Based on the study, many of the

structures and operations of the tourism industry (depending on perspectives and political ideologies) can be used either as tools for development, modernization, and progress, or as mechanisms of structural dependency and neo-colonialism. He provided a list of how international relations and tourism influence each other (Brown, 1998) (Table 1).

According to the liberal school, tourism is an important activity in the development of international relations; because on the one hand, it expands economic interdependence between governments, and on the other hand, it provides a platform for person-to-person contact at the international level. Person-to-person communications, which are created through trade and services, lead to an increase in wealth and the formation of a capable middle class that can achieve political freedom such as democracy. Tourism, due to its participation at both micro and macro levels, can act as a catalyst for the expansion of peaceful relations (Prideaux et al., 2007).

Table 1. Interactions between tourism and international relations.

Tourism-related impacts	International relations
Widespread visitor discouragement, economic shocks, destruction of tourism infrastructure	War/Conflict
Tourism an easy option to implement	Economic competition
Movement of tour operators and tourists to cheaper countries	Exchange Rate Changes/Devaluation/Inflation
Commercialization of tourism or inclusion of remote communities in global trends	Globalization
Tourism replacing agriculture in less developed countries and industry in developed countries	Growth/Development/Reconstruction
Tourism a factor in perpetuating colonialism through structural dependency	Neocolonialism, Periphery-Center Relations
Tourists aiming to financially damage governments	Separatism/Independence/Fundamental Changes
Tourism as an image enhancer, notably through major events	Ideology/Lifestyle Promotion
Travel bans; strict quarantine regulations	Ideology or Religion Dissent
Regional marketing strategies	International Cooperation
Low/high travel costs; good/bad services; travel security problems	Lawlessness
Use of tourism as a tool to create border tensions and expand power	Sovereignty and Dominance
Possibility of regional integration; Regional Aid	People Flows Across Borders
Impact on the Balance of Payments	Foreign Currency Flows Across Regions
Establishment of New Power Organizations; Increased Attraction	Domestic/Foreign Investment in Destinations
Managed and Unmanaged Social Changes	Theatrical Effect
Impact on Interstate Relations	Imposition or Removal of Visas
Potential for Discontent	Visit of Large Numbers of Tourists

(Source: Brown, 1998)

Materials and methods

The present research is, in terms of its objective, applied, and in terms of its nature, of the descriptive-analytical and future-oriented (futures studies section) type. The required data for the research have been collected in two ways: library/documentary and field (questionnaire-based). In this regard, first, by reviewing theoretical foundations and previous studies, the indicators affecting international relations on tourism development were extracted (initial indicators), then using the content analysis method and the opinions of 10 experts selected through the snowball sampling method, the indicators were finalized and a questionnaire for assessing the current situation was designed. Subsequently, by entering the futures studies stage, the challenges (restraining factors), drivers, and key factors were identified through the cross-impact matrix questionnaire and of course with the opinions of experts. In this study, based on its objectives, specific and diverse models and software tools have been used. Specifically, for identifying the challenges as well as the drivers and key factors, the Structural-Interpretive Modeling (ISM) method and MICMAC analysis were used.

Results

Identification of the drivers and key factors of Iran's tourism in terms of international relations

Content analysis of the factors

In line with identifying the key and important factors of Iran's tourism in terms of international relations, first the components extracted from the theoretical foundations of the research were merged and combined by the research authors' team (similar and goal-aligned components), and then, through the content analysis method, the opinions of 10 expert professionals were gathered (scoring based on the level of necessity). In this regard, the components/factors whose CVR coefficient was above 0.75 were introduced as the essential factors of the study (Table 2).

$$CVR = \frac{n_e - \frac{N}{2}}{\frac{N}{2}} = \frac{9 - \frac{10}{2}}{\frac{10}{2}} = 0.8 \quad (1)$$

Of the 49 factors examined, 17 factors scored above 0.75. Subsequently, the three components of political sanctions, financial sanctions, and technological sanctions were combined under the name of the sanctions index to ultimately identify 15 components as the most important factors influencing international relations on the country's tourism. Subsequently, these 15 factors were evaluated in pairs by 10 experts (urgency determination questionnaire) to determine the key factors for scenario writing (Table 3).

According to the previous explanation, to identify the key factors of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations, structural-interpretive modeling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis were used. The aforementioned method has the following steps, which are presented in the following order.

Structural self-interaction matrix (SSIM)

After identifying the final factors of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations, these factors were

entered into the structural self-interaction matrix (SSIM) (to examine the extent of the influence of each factor on each other). For this purpose, a 15×15 questionnaire was initially designed in a pairwise comparison. In this way, the 15 selected factors were listed in the first row and column of the table and the experts were asked to specify the type of pairwise relationships between the factors. For this purpose, four symbols are used as follows.

Symbol V: i leads to j.

Symbol A: j leads to i.

Symbol X: two-way relationship from i to j and vice versa.

Symbol O: There is no connection between i and j.

After summarizing the opinions of the experts, the structural matrix of the internal relationships of the factors (structural self-interaction) was extracted in the form of Table 4.

Primary access matrix

As explained earlier, the primary access matrix is obtained by converting the structural self-interaction matrix into a two-valued matrix (0 and 1). To extract the access matrix, the number one must be substituted for the symbols V and X in each row and the number zero must be substituted for the symbols A and O in the primary access matrix. After converting all the rows, the result will be the primary access matrix. In the next step, the secondary relationships between the variables must be controlled. The secondary relationship is such that if variable J leads to variable I, and this variable leads to K, then variable J will lead to variable K. By converting the symbols of the SSIM matrix relationships to the numbers zero and one according to the following rules, the matrix can be obtained. These rules are as follows:

If cell I, j in the SSIM matrix has the symbol V, the corresponding cell in the access matrix takes the number 1 and its symmetrical cell, that is, cell I, j, takes the number zero.

If the cell I, j in the SSIM matrix is symbolized A, the corresponding cell in the access matrix takes the number 0 and its mirror cell, i.e. cell I, j, takes the number 1.

If the cell I, j in the SSIM matrix is symbolized X, the corresponding cell in the access matrix takes the number 1 and its mirror cell, i.e. cell I, j, takes the number 1.

If the cell I, j in the SSIM matrix is symbolized O, the corresponding cell in the access matrix takes the number 0 and its mirror cell, i.e. cell I, j, takes the number 0.

According to the rules of the ISM technique, the initial access matrix is transformed according to Table 5.

Final access matrix

After the initial access matrix of important factors of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations is formed by including transferability in the relationships of variables, the final access matrix is formed to adapt the initial access matrix. At this stage, all secondary relationships between variables are examined to obtain the final access matrix. This matrix shows the influence and degree of dependence of each variable. The influence of each variable is the final number of variables (including it) that can play a role in their creation. The degree of dependence is the final number of variables that cause the creation of the mentioned variable. With regard to Table 6, the factors of the country's

Table 2. Content analysis of the selection of the main research components.

Dimensions	Components	Number of “Required” Responses	CVR Ratio
P	Political structure of the country/Political ideology governing the country	9 out of 10	0.8
	War and conflict	10 out of 10	1
	Structure of the international system	8 out of 10	0.6
	Security	10 out of 10	1
	Political sanctions	9 out of 10	0.8
	Effectiveness of foreign policy and international relations	9 out of 10	0.8
	Overview of foreign policy	7 out of 10	0.4
	Peaceful diplomacy, peaceful coexistence with neighbors and constructive interaction with countries	9 out of 10	0.8
	Travel services to the country/Issuance of visas and other tourism services	9 out of 10	0.8
	The issue of Iranophobia and the negative mental image of tourists about Iran	10 out of 10	1
	The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action	9 out of 10	0.8
	Embassies and missions as tourism activists	8 out of 10	0.6
	Balancing foreign relations (multilateralism)	6 out of 10	0.2
E	Country’s economic structure	8 out of 10	0.6
	Competitiveness	8 out of 10	0.6
	Globalization	8 out of 10	0.6
	Financial sanctions	9 out of 10	0.8
	Boycott of banks and insurance institutions	10 out of 10	1
	Capacity building	8 out of 10	0.6
	Introducing tourism opportunities and facilitating tourist arrival	9 out of 10	0.8
	Regional marketing strategies	6 out of 10	0.2
	Exchange rate changes/currency devaluation/inflation	9 out of 10	0.8
	Foreign investment in tourism infrastructure development	9 out of 10	0.8
S	Public opinion	7 out of 10	0.4
	Domestic needs and problems	7 out of 10	0.4
	Values and beliefs	8 out of 10	0.6
	Historical and cultural contexts	5 out of 10	0
	Cultural structure of the country	6 out of 10	0.2
	International appearance	8 out of 10	0.6
	Media and cyberspace advertising	9 out of 10	0.8
	Cultural exchanges	7 out of 10	0.4
	Interaction of nations’ values, historical and cultural contexts	6 out of 10	0.2
	Acting and activism of non-state actors alongside state actors	8 out of 10	0.6
	Democracy	7 out of 10	0.4
	Neocolonialism, relations around the center	6 out of 10	0.2
	Propaganda of ideology/lifestyle	6 out of 10	0.2
	Respect for human rights	7 out of 10	0.4
	Awareness and acceptance of different cultures	7 out of 10	0.4
	Communication between people and tourists	8 out of 10	0.6
T	The level of general knowledge of international languages among the country’s people	8 out of 10	0.6
	Technology embargo	9 out of 10	0.8
	Limitations in access to world-class technology	9 out of 10	0.8
	Weakness in learning and growth infrastructure	8 out of 10	0.6
E	Sustainable tourism’s contribution to environmental protection	6 out of 10	0.2
	Tourism’s pressure on local resources such as energy, food and other raw materials	5 out of 10	0
L	The country’s legal structure	9 out of 10	0.8
	Distance from scientific and global requirements and the basic principles of this industry; Legal shortcomings and gaps in legislation and weak performance of executive institutions	6 out of 10	0.2
	Imposition or elimination of visas	8 out of 10	0.6
	Travel restrictions; imposition of strict quarantine laws	8 out of 10	0.6

Source: Findings extracted from the questionnaire, 1403.

Table 3. Main factors/components of the research.

Code	Components
X1	Political structure of the country/Political ideology governing the country
X2	War and conflict
X3	Security
X4	Sanctions
X5	Effectiveness of foreign policy and international relations
X6	Peaceful diplomacy, peaceful coexistence with neighbors and constructive interaction with countries
X7	Travel services to the country/Issuing visas and other tourism services
X8	The issue of Iranophobia and the negative image of tourists about Iran
X9	JCPOA
X10	Boycott of banks and insurance institutions
X11	Introducing tourism opportunities and facilitating tourist entry
X12	Exchange rate changes/currency devaluation/inflation
X13	Foreign investment in the development of tourism infrastructure
X14	Advertising in the media and cyberspace
X15	Limitations in access to modern technology

Source: Research findings, 1403.

political structure/political ideology ruling the country (X1), war and conflict (X2) and sanctions (X4) have the highest influence with an influence of 13, and the security factor (X3) has the lowest influence with an influence of 14.

At this stage, using MICMAC, the type of variables is determined according to their influence and impact on other variables, and after determining the influence and dependence of the factors, all key factors of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations can be classified into one of four groups or clusters:

The first group (first quadrant): includes autonomous vari-

ables that have weak influence and dependence. These variables are somewhat separate from other variables and have few connections. The second group (second quadrant): are dependent variables that have weak influence but high dependence. The third group (third quadrant): are linked variables that have high influence (stimulation) and dependence. In fact, any action on these variables causes changes in other variables. The fourth group (fourth quadrant): includes independent (key) variables. These variables have high influence and low dependence. In the analysis of power and dependence, these categories act as the structural cor-

Table 4. Structural self-interaction matrix of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations.

Components/ Code	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9	X10	X11	X12	X13	X14	X15
X1		V	V	X	V	X	V	X	X	X	X	X	A	V	A
X2	-		X	V	X	V	V	V	X	X	V	V	V	X	V
X3	-	-		A	X	X	X	X	X	A	X	X	X	X	X
X4	-	-	-		V	X	V	V	X	V	V	V	V	X	V
X5	-	-	-	-		V	V	V	X	V	V	V	X	X	V
X6	-	-	-	-	-		V	V	X	V	X	X	X	X	X
X7	-	-	-	-	-	-		V	A	X	X	X	A	X	A
X8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		A	X	V	V	A	A	A
X9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		A	V	A	V	O	A
X10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		O	X	A	O	X
X11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		X	A	A	X
X12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		X	O	X
X13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		O	X
X14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		X
X15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

Source: Findings extracted from the questionnaire, 1403.

Table 5. Initial access matrix.

Components/ Code	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9	X10	X11	X12	X13	X14	X15
X1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0
X2	0		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
X3	0	1		0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
X4	1	0	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
X5	0	1	1	0		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
X6	1	0	1	1	0		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
X7	0	0	1	0	0	0		1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
X8	1	0	1	0	1	0	0		0	1	1	1	0	0	0
X9	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1		0	1	0	1	0	0
X10	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1		0	1	0	0	1
X11	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0		1	0	0	1
X12	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1		1	0	1
X13	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1		0	1
X14	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0		1
X15	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	

Source: Findings extracted from the questionnaire, 1403.

Table 6. Degree of guiding power (influence or stimulation) and dependence of variables.

Code/ Components	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9	X10	X11	X12	X13	X14	X15
Influence	12	13	11	13	12	12	6	6	9	9	6	10	10	10	11
Dependency	9	6	14	5	11	11	13	12	8	11	13	11	8	8	10

nerstones of the system and should be emphasized first for fundamental changes in the system's performance. In other words, management should pay special attention to them so that they can monitor their impact on other variables and select mechanisms to improve other variables.

The results obtained from the classification of research variables in figure 1- show that no factor is included in the group of autonomous variables.

The factors of the country's political structure/political ideology ruling the country (X1), travel services to the country/issuing visas and other tourism services (X7), the issue of Iranophobia and the negative mental image of tourists about Iran (X8), introducing tourism opportunities and facilitating tourist entry (X11) are among the influential and dependent elements. In other words, many factors are involved in creating this case and they themselves are less likely to create other cases.

Also, the third group or connected/bimodal/linked variables are security factors (X3), foreign policy effectiveness and international relations (X5), peaceful diplomacy, peaceful coexistence with neighbors and constructive interaction with countries (X6), boycott of banks and insurance institutions (X10), exchange rate changes/currency devaluation/inflation (X12), and restrictions on access to modern technology (X15).

In the fourth group, which are independent variables, are war and conflict factors (X2), sanctions (X4), JCPOA (X9), foreign investment in tourism infrastructure development

(X13), and advertising in the media and cyberspace (X14), which are considered key variables of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations.

Compiling a list of the most important key factors of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations.

Key factors are factors that affect the success or failure of the main decision/focal question. According to the previous discussion, 5 key factors related to the futures study of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations (the impact of Iran's international relations on the development of the tourism sector with a futures study approach) were identified and selected using the interpretive structural modeling (ISM) method and MICMAC analysis. The table below presents a list of the selected key factors of the study.

Table 7. List of key factors affecting the impact of Iran's international relations on the development of the tourism sector with a futures research approach.

List of key factors
Foreign investment in tourism infrastructure development
Advertising in media and cyberspace
War and conflict
Sanctions
JCPOA

Source: Findings extracted from the questionnaire, 1403.

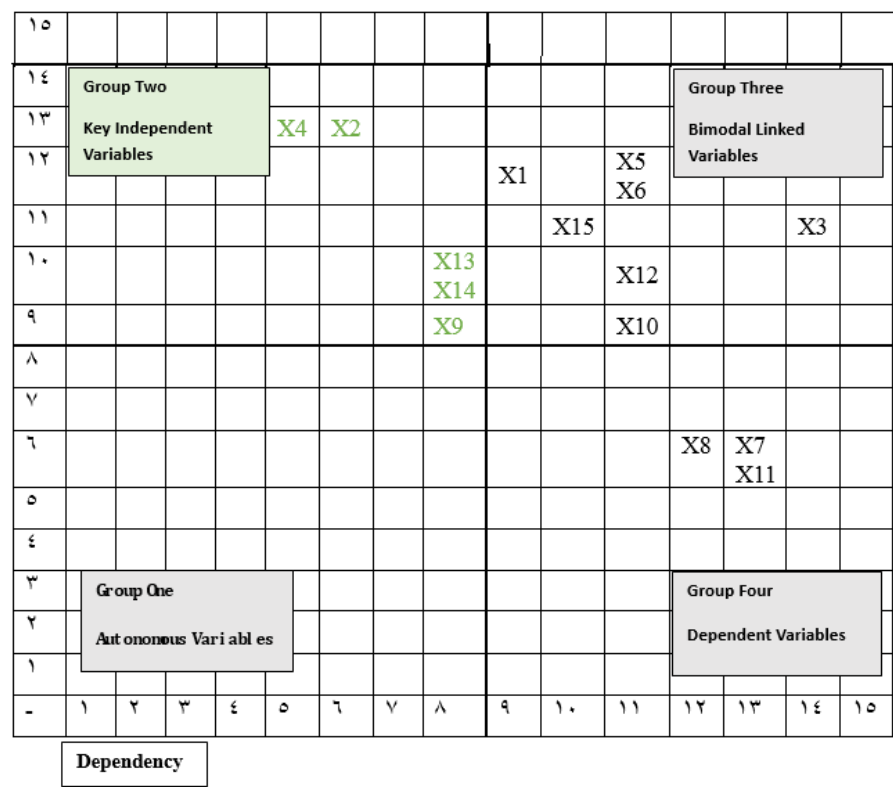


Figure 1. Classification of key factors of Iranian tourism from the perspective of international relations using the MICMAC method.

Conclusion

The development of international tourism requires resolving international issues, including emerging challenges resulting from sanctions. In this regard, it seems that the interpretive structural modeling (ISM) research model is useful, as the use of expert opinions and content validity can reduce the complexity of the subject, lead to an acceptable understanding of the topic under study, and ultimately result in better decision-making through the identification of priorities. Accordingly, this study attempted to identify and categorize the most important challenges, driving forces, and key factors of Iran’s tourism in terms of international relations. The results of the study showed that among the 15 initially identified factors, 5 were recognized as the final factors, and among these, five factors-foreign investment in the development of tourism infrastructure; media and online advertising; war and conflict; sanctions; and the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action)—were the most influential.

Given the findings of the research, it can be concluded that the most important challenges, driving forces, and key factors of Iran’s tourism from the perspective of international relations are economic in nature. This factor holds high priority and, in fact, the key to developing the country’s tourism industry is resolving international economic-financial issues. It must be noted that in emphasizing these factors, one should not neglect other factors, because all factors are interconnected in a systemic manner, and depending on the topic, they can have different influences and be influenced differently. The results of this research align with the findings of studies by Çukışler (2023), Prabowo and Sinaga (2020), Seifi and Hall (2019), Faridzadeh et

al. (2024), Lanjani et al. (2021), Malakouti (2020), and Zarei (2020).

Since one of the most important achievements of the tourism industry is generating foreign currency for the country, the expenses for establishing a tourism industry are not very high compared to other industries, and on the other hand, it is very beneficial and productive in terms of employment. According to tourism and travel experts, the income generated from the arrival of each tourist to the country leads to the creation of one job. Global investments in the tourism industry indicate that tourism is one of the income-distributing industries. When a tourist enters a country, they must pay for the services provided to them, and these payments are in foreign currency. Therefore, this industry can become a substitute for the mono-product economy, i.e., oil revenue. The two main components for developing tourism in the country are infrastructure development and marketing. For infrastructure—for instance, building hotels and offering low-cost services, constructing recreational facilities, preparing religious and historical as well as cultural sites to attract tourists, offering diverse cultural programs, and creating spaces to provide cultural services to tourists—and in the domain of marketing and advertising, all resources including television, various satellite channels, the Internet, experts in attracting tourists, etc., must be utilized. All the aforementioned aspects require macro-level planning and precise execution so that we can overcome the foreign currency crisis and economic problems that may arise in the future due to potential sanctions. It is also important to consider that indirect employment creation in the tourism industry is a strong driver for the entire national industry.

Building hotels and supplying them, establishing entertainment centers, and overall strengthening infrastructure; leads to job creation in various industries of the country. Ultimately, given the possible sanctions, the tourism industry is one of the most important internal capacities of Iran's economy that, even under sanctions, cannot be prevented from creating employment, generating wealth, and bringing in foreign currency.

It is also recommended to policymakers that the tourism industry is characterized by volatility or perishability, peacefulness, and a quest for calm, so any actions that might suggest the creation of insecurity in the country must be avoided. To present a secure image of Iran—which is, in fact, the true image of Iran—expenditures must be made, and all relevant bodies and officials in the country must exercise utmost responsibility and, at times, verbal restraint to prevent unnecessary costs from being imposed on the country and its people. It is also suggested that the country's diplomatic missions abroad be allocated a special budget for tourism and be regularly equipped with necessary promotional materials so that in cases where the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization is, for any reason, unable to have an active presence in foreign tourism exhibitions and events, they can introduce and promote the country's tourist attractions in various ways. Finally, one of the main ways to prevent the damages of sanctions on tourism is to adopt a resistance economy approach to overcome this crisis.

The lack of coherent marketing policies in the tourism sector is also an issue. The government, in order to improve tourism marketing, should employ policies such as market segmentation, price flexibility of tourism products, and governmental support for advertising. With such a policy package, the realization of resistance economy strategies in the tourism sector can be expected in the future.

Authors contributions

Authors have contributed equally in preparing and writing the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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