

Halal and Religious Tourism Development in Mashhad, Iran

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Abstract: Mashhad is not only a megacity for religious tourism (nationally and internationally), but also a major source of revenue for the government of Iran. Mashhad's potential to become a more economically lucrative city for the halal-conscious tourist has sparked expansive development by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The government in its halalization of the city is investing money into a wide array of tourist-related establishments in order to become members of a global halal-certified business community and to take advantage of the rapidly growing religious tourism industry.

To issue halal certifications, in 2014 the Iranian government established the Halal National & Regional Research Center as a new division in the Agriculture Research Institute. From an economic perspective, this is a sound investment for the Iranian government with a prospect of lucrative economic rewards. Halal certification in Iran is also a timely project since, according to recent studies, halal tourism is among the fastest and more lucrative form of travel among Muslim travelers. Mashhad has without doubt the potential of becoming one of the most significant Shi'i halal pilgrimage destinations in the world. With already over 2 million visitors annually coming to this city, the halal certification makes it even more attractive for international Muslim halal-conscious tourists. This paper also discusses the expansion and improvements in infrastructure, which includes park maintenance, public art projects and many other beautification projects in Mashhad to attract tourists in even greater numbers not only for religious purposes but also to enjoy the city itself and all it has to offer.

Keywords: Mashhad, Iran, Iranian tourism and halal tourism, Beautification of mashhad, Mashhad's municipality, *Seпах*, and *Astan-e Quds-e Razavi*, *Bonyad*.

INTRODUCTION

The global market for halal products (permissible by Islamic law) is in a state of rapid expansion. The range of halal products extends far beyond food and drink, but includes everything from banking, fashion, books, television, Internet, as well as tourism. The new industry is mushrooming on a global scale. The prospect of halal-certified products has demonstrated strong appeal to Muslims everywhere, including immigrants in non-Muslim majority countries, second generation Muslims who are generally more professionally oriented, educated, and affluent, hence can afford halal brands that are usually more expensive compared to the same item without the halal certification, as well as those Muslims already living in Muslim majority nations [1]. Muslim youth groups are usually targeted by many new and innovative industries and services such as halal hospital services, banking, vacationing and travel, even hospices. "... Muslims are actually more brand-aware than the general population...[and have felt] largely ignored by marketers" [2]. Enterprising entrepreneurs in both Muslim and non-Muslim majority countries routinely create new products and services resulting in lucrative economic gains. Entrepreneurs are quick to come up with halal solutions. A recent innovation, for example, is

the Halal Test Kit. The inventors are two French entrepreneurs who developed this portable device to test for the presence of pork in food. "With France's five million Muslims making up about 8% of the overall population, the test, similar in size to a pregnancy test, aims to help consumers detect traces of pork not just in food, but also in cosmetics or medicines" [3]. Obviously with the large number of Muslims residing in France, this invention is a welcome addition for the halal-minded person.

HALAL TOURISM: A NEW BRAND CONCEPT

Since the 9/11 attack, tourism from the Western world to some Muslim countries has collapsed, resulting in a huge loss of revenue for those Muslim nations. The general problem is due to several groups of Islamic fundamentalists who are targeting non-Muslims and Muslims alike. Meanwhile, as Iran is investing heavily in making Mashhad one of its destinations for the halal-conscious global religious tourist, it is also striving to become the second largest Muslim pilgrimage destination for the Shi'is in the world after Mecca. At the time of this writing, Iran can easily attract Shi'i pilgrimages into a country deemed safe when compared to other Shi'i tourist destinations such as Syria and Iraq.

A large number of respondents in an online survey published by *Telegraph*, UK, showed interest and a positive attitude toward tourist travel to Iran, although

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not specifically for a halal destination. Certainly a large number of Muslims who live in non-Muslim majority nations would be among these potential tourists. The survey question asked the reader: "Would you go on holiday to Iran?" The majority response (81%) was: "Yes, looks a great country." Other options in answer to the question were: "Not until the foreign office says it is OK" (10%), "Not sure" (4%), and "Never" (5%). Certainly, the lifting of sanctions against Iran results in more trips taken by westerners to Iran [4]. Since the election of current President Hassan Rouhani, Iran has been visited by a greater number of Western nationals by using a third party (tourist agencies that directly work with the government) and much paperwork to obtain a week's tourist visa. By lifting travel restrictions to Iran, tourism would be a thriving industry because "...it would facilitate booking transportation and hotels, withdrawing cash, and paying with credit cards when in the country" [4].

Among the services that the World Halal Institute supports is halal tourism, which guarantees a convenient stay for devout Muslims during their visits. The halal holiday is a new product in the tourism industry providing full holiday services in accordance with Islamic beliefs and practices [5]. A population of 1.6 billion Muslims globally offers a huge potential for the halal tourism industry. Halal tourism is estimated to be around 2 trillion dollars, yet much of it is unexplored, and "countries that promote halal vacations, makes the holiday experience for a Sharia abiding Muslim, a pleasant and memorable one" [6]. A more recent trend in the tourism industry is to list all halal services and provide complete halal experiences.

Although Muslims constitute one of the largest tourist clienteles in the world, the perceived value of this genre of tourism has yet to be clearly defined. Several non-Muslim majority nations, recognizing that Muslims prefer to stay in halal-friendly hotels, have begun providing this halal-oriented service. Among the nations quick to cater to Muslim tourists are China, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Argentina, South Africa, and Belgium. These "Muslim-friendly" destinations also play instrumental roles in assisting local firms to export goods and services to Muslim nations, and the commerce seems to benefit all parties involved [11].

Global halal tourism is an established industry with annual conference meetings providing research paper presentations, exchange of ideas and discussions of new technology and innovations in the field of tourism, in particular its adoption of halal principles. The annual

halal tourism conference rotates in different parts of the world. For example, during The Halal Tourism Conference 2014, which was held in Granada, Spain (hosted by Creative Minds Media and Andalucian Routes), it was revealed that 12.3% of the total global outbound tourism expenditure in 2011 in the Muslim tourism market was \$126.1 billion.

Muslim tourists can be classified under three general groups: 1) the pilgrims whose major reason to travel is to fulfill a religious ritual, 2) the Muslims that take the trip mostly for pleasure and vacation, and 3) tourists that not only would like to fulfill a pilgrimage, but also would like to use part of their trip for vacation and enjoyment in sightseeing and taking in local culture and hospitality. For halal tourism, tourists expect that hotels and lodgings, restaurants, fast foods and prayer services are a priority and that corporations should equip their centers with halal logos in order to attract tourists.

Because of so much contemporary negativity associated with Islam, marketing tourism to the Islamic nations might be a daunting task; however a large number of religious minded Muslim tourists would feel comfortable visiting a Muslim nation with halal brands and services available to them [12]. The rapid growth of halal tourism is evident from numerous published academic studies and online growth of travel agencies exclusively related to this lucrative service industry. A number of studies focus on the development of "...themes for branding Islamic spiritual tourism based on attitudes and behaviors of spiritual tourists" [13] although spiritual tourism has a long history in the literature across various disciplines.

A case study concerning the potential for Iran's tourism (Bahae, and Saremi, 2013) points to the unique cultural history of Islamic Iran with its varied climate and landscape as one of the most favorable tourist destinations in the Middle East [14]. Another tourism study about Iran examines how Iranian's Islamic religiosity and practice may affect the socio-cultural influences caused by tourism in Iran (Zamani-Farahani, and Ghazali, 2012) [15]. In another study comparing Islamic tourism in Iran and Saudi Arabia, the authors examine the effects of state religion on the development of the tourism industry (Zamani-Farahani, and Henderson, 2010) [16].

HALAL IRAN

Iran has 77.45 million people (2013 census), Shi'i Islam is the dominant religion, accounting for 95% of

the population, which constitutes a critical mass for halal products. The Iranian government believes that Iran is able to provide a strong leadership in the region and eventually could be a halal hub for various manufacturing consumer goods and services. This is an economic opportunity with ample potential for innovative halal services and products for a broad range of businesses complying with the Sharia principles, not only for domestic consumption, but also to compete in the international global market.

Given the recent number of studies that support lucrative sustainable economic gain by entering the halal market, the government of Iran found it necessary to establish a scientific research center to issue halal certifications and to create the halal seal (logo) on every service and product sold or exported to other nations to certify and guarantee its halal purity. Thus, in 2014 for the first time in Iran, the Iranian Research Organization for Science and Technology (IROST) established a Halal National & Regional Research Center of Iran at IROST [17].

In Iran, as of 2014, a halal food standard is not yet obligatory. The logical assumption on the part of both consumers and the government is that living in a Muslim nation run by an Islamic government and Sharia, everything is halal. This notion is not always true, since a halal certification requires a revamp of many sources, procedures, manufacturing, transportation, storage and distribution. In other words, it is only halal to eat or drink if the process of purity for halal is observed from farm to table for consumption. However, a halal standard is granted to Iranian products to promote them for the international halal market, and it is a form of security measure used for an Iranian halal brand name, as the government is trying to make Iran a halal hub in the world and the Middle East region.

The secretary general of the Halal World Institute; Abdol-Hossein Fakhari stated that more than 1000 Iranian industrial food products are “fully observing the requirements for obtaining the Halal Food Standard label in addition to the halal standard label granted by the Iranian Standard Institutes, these products are recognized by 57 Muslim nations globally” [18] (See Figures 1 and 2). However, given this status, production of halal food, as an economic priority for Iran should be considered as one of the export indices in the country. International sanctions in place against Iran due to political reasons in addition to the inability to

pay export incentives are the key reasons for Iran's absence in the markets trading halal products. The Iranian government is optimistic about the opportunities to be gained through entering the halal market when the economic sanctions are completely lifted. In 2013, Iran chose the 17th day of Ramadan, to be “World Halal Day,” as decided by the Global Halal Certification Organization meeting in 2013.

Iran's Halal Logs



Figure 1: Logo of Halal authorized by: Vali Faghih Representative, Religious Supervision, Halal Iran. This logo shows the official stamp and code number (01132157106) authorized by sharia supervision. The top left of the logo reads “The Veterinary Organization of Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Source: <http://financialtribune.com/articles/people/18159/iran-halal-food-popular-abroad>



Figure 2: This halal logo is developed by “National & Regional Iranian Halal Research Center.”

Source: <http://www2.irost.org/ari/en/content/national-and-regional-iranian-halal-research-center>

MASHHAD THE CITY

Razavi Khorasan is a land of mountains and deserts. Its capital is Mashhad. The state of Khorasan has a population of over five million people and Mashhad is populated by 2,749,374 residents from a 2011 census. Khorasan is the largest state in Iran and is located in the northeastern part of the country, bordering Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. The word Khorasan is a compound of *khwar/Khour* (meaning sun) and *āsān* (from *āyān*, literally meaning “to come” or “coming” or “about to come”). Thus, the name *Khorasan* (or *Khorāyān*) means “land where the sun rises” or “east.” The name Mashhad derives from Arabic, meaning the place of martyrdom (Shehadat), the place where the eighth Shi'i Imam, Ali ar-Ridha (Persian: Imam Reza) was martyred. His shrine is located in this city. In earlier times, Mashhad was a village called Sanābād or Nūqān [19].

Mashhad as a major tourism hub can become the new halal tourism capital with the goal of being registered on the list of major halal tourism sites globally. To that end, for example, Iran Doostan Tours Co. website emphasizes the concept of halal on their advertisement page, offering peace of mind to their potential Muslim tourists who can travel anywhere in Iran without worrying about eating out or looking for segregated praying spaces. Iran Doostan Tour Co. lists many halal services such as women-only water parks, segregated areas at the beaches where swim suits can be worn without worry, or co-ed family beaches where women can be in the company of their family members but cannot swim in bathing suits. “Iran has it all; halal food in restaurants and markets, prayer facilities, and Islamic bathrooms in all cities” (“Islamic bathroom” is meant to be a reference to squat toilets and the toilet hose or any type of washing vessel) [20] Other halal websites and blogs also include the city of Mashhad and Tabriz as among the top halal destinations of Iran [21]. Other innovative efforts on the part of the government include collaboration with some tour organizers, not specifically for halal destination, but for special Women-only tours. “Meet Iran’s women, and find out who they are, learn about their experiences. From artists to sportswomen, fashion designers to weavers, singers and dancers. Visit Iran's classical sites along the way” [22].

In Iran there are separate beaches for women and men, and by law all the swimming pools are gender-segregated. All the natural mineral and hot springs are

open to both genders, but genders are separated by operating on different days and following rotating hours. In my previous publications, I have spoken in much more detail about the profitability of what is known these days as “Islamic” bathing suits and Islamic sportswear that are manufactured for devoted Muslim women observant, although most of such products are created and manufactured in non Muslim majority nations. In the same publication I have also provided examples of gender-segregated beaches, for example in the Persian Gulf area where Iran is visited by a large population of domestic and foreign tourists in Kish Island, signs posted read “Ladies’ beach Only, entry of gentlemen is forbidden” [23].

Since the rise of ISIS [24] (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Mashhad airport has seen a large number of Iraqis arriving on pilgrimage to this city. “After Saddam fell in 2003, many Iraqis were coming to Iran each year, but then it kind of evened out after two or three years,” “I estimate it hovered at around 100,000 a year for a while. But it’s risen sharply over the past year [2014]” said, an official at the Hashemi Nejad international airport in Mashhad [25]. The official number of foreign tourists to Iran is around 1.5 million people annually; 23% of this group is Iraqis. All of the other cities in Iran altogether cannot boast of such tourism figures. However, the Iranian government estimates that the number of Iraqi pilgrimages is much higher than what the government records show. Based on the government estimation, Iraqis count for 1.3 million who visit Iran each year. A total estimated annual revenue gained from pilgrimage is about \$517 million [25].

In addition to the revenue gained from the pilgrims who visit Mashhad, other opportunities are also open to enter the halal food global market. In 2015 Iranians spent about \$61 billion on food and beverages. With the recent lifting of sanctions against Iran, many new economical opportunities have opened up. For example,

Iran is offering halal poultry to a number of countries and plans to triple the amount of poultry it currently supplies to Oman in 2016-an estimated increase of 15,000 tones. Iran also continues to export poultry to Saudi Arabia and Iraq and is targeting exports of 1 million tones of poultry in the near future [26].

Malaysia’s Department of Islamic Advancement of Malaysia (JAKIM) is the only recognized international

halal certification authority in Iran. Malaysia was ahead of the game years before halal became a desirable aspect for commodities, and gradually marketed its image as such, so that it became the leader in halal production industry. Ironically, in Malaysia only 61.3% of its population is Muslim, and the remainder 38.7% of Malaysians consists of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and traditional Chinese religions. Thus, comparatively the Islamic Republic of Iran with its substantial larger number of Muslim people can easily be a halal hub in the Middle East. Valuable lessons can be learned from Malaysia and its lucrative halal industry.

Realizing the large potential of the halal business and the continuous unique position and strength, Malaysia has positioned itself to become the Global Halal Hub. To spearhead and coordinate the halal industry, the Government established the Halal Industry Development (HDC) [27].

Stated by: Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato'Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak.

Because the government of Iran has now begun interacting with the rest of the world, foreign tourists from the European nations and other Islamic nations have increased. Iran wants now to bank on the halal trend and develop its Islamic tourism, providing logo halal certification on established food suppliers, restaurants, and many other public facilities and services. A large number of halal tour companies, such as HalalBooking Ltd., are located in non-Muslim majority nations [7]. Also, in accordance to the demands of Muslim travelers, more hotels are having their kitchens halal-certified. "Hotels [in] Singapore] with halal kitchens say they have seen a five to 10 per cent increase in business since becoming halal-certified" [8]. Packaged halal holiday getaways (such as "Halal Honeymoon") [9] are becoming a trend among young Muslim couples with such trips being arranged in both Muslim majority as well as non-Muslim majority nations. "Crescent Tours, a London-based travel agent, books clients into hotels in Turkey that have separate swimming pools for men and women, no-alcohol policies and halal restaurants, and rents out private holiday villas with high walls" [10]. Muslims in greater numbers are searching for Muslim-friendly hotels and resorts in which to spend their money. Many believe that spending their money in Muslim-run establishments is a form of good deed (*thawab*).

BEAUTIFICATION OF PUBLIC URBAN SPACES IN MASHHAD, ANOTHER TOURIST ATTRACTION: A CHALLENGING REALITY

The Iranian urban art scene and landscape are evolving into a new form, visibly distancing itself from just murals of martyrs (*Shohada*) of the Iran-Iraq War. The revolutionary messaging also is evolving into other types of artwork that at the same time continues to be acceptable by the municipality for the public to view. However, to achieve this process to revert from melancholy art scenes imbued with religious symbolism (whose history dates from the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the culture of Shi'i martyrdom of Moharram, which is the the historical event of what is known as *mosibat-e karbala* the Karbala Tragedy) is not as simple as it might sound. The difficulty is due to the political power structure in today's Iran where a political struggle exists between the charitable trusts (*bonyads*) and the Mashhad municipality. In general, all the *bonyads* are criticized for not paying tax that weakens the economy of Iran. Most of all, *bonyads* receive substantial subsidies directly from the government and other forms of assistance from other branches of the government.

Bonyads exercise considerable power in Iran. An example is the case in the city of Mashhad where mural paintings, commissioned by the approval of the municipality of the city, became a subject of political battle regarding the right to use public space. The city approved to renovate the public areas previously dominated by wartime propaganda posters, graffiti, texts, and murals. These public spaces were to get a makeover by local artists that would use a mix of secular, Iranian heritage and culture in addition to religious and commutative wartime murals, sculpture, and art work, commissioned by the municipality, was installed in large squares and boulevards strategically located in high traffic areas of the town. In the aforementioned dispute, "...the municipality created a large task force - comprised of teams of artists and university students - that has [have] since decorated 734,000 meters of walls with over 2,000 individual works of art. Mashhad is now competing with Tehran for the title of Iran's most decorated city" [28]. In those personally allocated spaces, the artists, inspired by Iranian heritage and culture, created a lot of original art.

The Mashhad municipality further initiated a special program for public university art students to use the public space to create a mural for the city and to use it as a final project in their program of study. This was a clever, economical way for students to showcase their work. However, the art work created in Mashhad's

urban spaces resulted in new political problems. The municipality granted permission to create art in public to civil society rather than the members of the *bonyad* that would dictate the subject matter of revolutionary and religious themes. Irrespectively, the final approval of the location and the nature of the art work were within the domain of the municipality. The city planned for a large number of artworks to showcase the present day realities of Iranian cultural heritage. The city decided to have several categories of art for the public space. One category was that of the change from melancholy themes, intended to bring happiness to public viewers.

By placing statues and murals reflecting childhood, kinship, and love, these installations offer citizens ethical guidance as to how they should lead their daily lives. Embedding works of art with messages of morality, the municipality has demonstrated its investment in defining the values appropriate for society at large [28].

For over thirty years since the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, the entire country had been bombarded by Shi'i religious motifs whose themes of revolution and the war with Iraq, martyrdom with the blood of the martyrs were related in art. Such scenes were evident in the forms of mural painting, poster art, and running banners. The faded murals were to be refreshed with new coats of paint, but the subject matter would not change. The faded and torn posters were to be replaced with other posters of local and national martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War. Mashhad decided it was time to make a change and consider other themes of artwork while still keeping about 15% of the war, revolutionary, and religious themes. The new additional themes would appear in the public space dominated for many years with melancholy subjects of death, blood of martyrs, and negative propaganda messages aimed toward the West, mostly directed toward America and Israel. Perhaps more than at any other moment in recent history, in Iran posters and murals were used "...as powerful modalities for mobilization and communication during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88)" [29].

Among the works of art selected for public space in Mashhad belonged to a group dedicated to the poet and author of the immortal epic called the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Ferdowsi (c. 940-1020), who has a unique place in Persian history. He is known for

reviving the Persian language, regenerating Persian cultural traditions after Islam maintained a strong hold in Iran where Arabic vocabulary dominated Persian literature. In 2012 something went wrong in the case of a mural dedicated to Ferdowsi. The issue concerned the ownership of a stretch of wall with Shahnameh murals depicted on it. The murals (*divar negari*) on the walls of Ferdowsi square and Ferdowsi boulevards were decorated by a group of artists who took over a year to finish some 2,200 square meters of walls depicting passages of the seven labors of Rostam and the downfall of the tyrant Zakhak. (See Figures 3, 4, and 5) The murals, completed in 2011, were considered a beautiful and successful project by the media and residents of Mashhad. However,

On the morning of June 5th, 2011, commuters [in Mashhad] were shocked to find that the mural [s] had disappeared. The night before, a group of individuals equipped with hundreds of liters of white paint erased the installation within hours. After several days of confusion, speculation, and public outcry fueled by local newspapers covering the erasure, it was revealed that *Astan-e Qods-e Razavi*, a ...charitable endowment that manages the Imam Reza Shrine complex, was behind the removal of the mural [30].

The municipality and the Astan-e Qods met to discuss as to who has the right to beautify or remove artwork from the city. It became apparent that Astan-e Qods owned the walls with the Shahnameh's murals, and the Department of Preservation of Property and Land, a division within Astan-e Qods, removed the paintings. Meanwhile numerous media discussions and public opinion expressing dissatisfaction about the removal of the paintings appeared daily. Mashhadis were clearly not pleased with the Astan-e Qods's decision.

The city continued its beautification projects around the town. The incident involving Astan-e Qods became a reminder that the municipality of Mashhad does not have the power to control the entire city. Astan-e Qods is a rich and powerful organization and owns a lot of land and property that the municipality cannot touch. The media also presented two different sides of the story about the nature of the paintings agreed to between the Astan-e Qods and the municipality at first. According to Astan-e Qods, the agreement was to paint the walls with arabesque patterns. However, "The municipality sought to celebrate the work of Iran's

Erased Murals of Shahnameh in Mashhad



Figure 3: This map is showing the Fersowsi Square the area of disputed walls that murals were erased.



Figure 4: Section of the wall depicting a verse of the Shahnameh that has been partially erased.



Figure 5: Section of the wall depicting Rostam that has been partially erased.

Source: "A Mural Erased: Urban Art, Local Politics, and the Contestation of Public Space in Mashhad." Posted by: Rustin Zarkar <http://ajammc.com/2014/03/30/a-mural-erased-urban-art-mashhad/> March 30, 2014

national poet in the eponymous square, while Astan-e Qods removed the mural due to the secular nationalist connotations of Shahnameh imagery on its property" [31]. Thus, the clash of ideologies was responsible for Astan-e Qods' decision. In two years, the Shahnameh

mural was reproduced in a park area not owned by Astan-e Qods (See Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9).

Other anti-nationalistic, secular art battles between the religious segment and the municipality of Mashhad

New Shahnameh Murals created by Mashhad Municipality



Figure 6: The fight between Rakhsh (Rostam's horse) and the lion.



Figure 7: text of “*Khan-e Aval jang-e Rakhsh with Lion*” inscribe on the right hand side (5 couplets) the last single line at the bottom center is not part of the poem. It is basically a lesson that should be learnt from the poem. It reads:

Message: to tame your power is like a victory over the demon of your anger.

The text on the left on the same wall is not part of the poem it gives credit to the, the social and cultural authority of Mashhad Municipality, the designer (Neda Raofian) and the manger of the project (Neda Raofian). The seal of Mashhad Municipality stamped on the top of the text.



Figure 8: Rostam fighting the enemy on the horse.

have occurred. For example, the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad Elm-ol-Hoda (2009-2010) exercised his religious authoritative power to have removed a number of public statues commissioned and installed

by the municipality, in addition to issuing a *fatwa* / religious decree “...banning musical concerts within an 80 kilometer radius of Mashhad due to its status as a holy city” [31]. Thus violating its halal status.



Figure 9: Rostam is attending injured Sohrab.

Source: <http://www.iroon.com/irtn/album/photo/5511/>

In 2011 after the Shahnameh mural was removed, Mashhad witnessed another dispute between *bonyad* Astan-e Qods and a local branch of the Revolutionary Guards (*Sepah*) [32] that has a base within a short distance from Ferdowsi square. In 2013 the Revolutionary Guards joined forces with the Administrative Office of Artistic Affairs [30] to create another Shahnameh mural on its walls depicting battle scenes of Rostam. Perhaps this was a strategic move on Sepah's part, since these walls are directly located across from the Astan-e Qods sports complex. The Rostam battle scenes "...were compatible with the nationalist orientation of the Revolutionary Guards, which relies on the revolution, war, and patriotism for legitimacy but does not advocate for the maintenance of an Islamic public sphere in the same manner as Astan-e Qods" [30] (See Figures 10 and 11).

In Mashhad as in any other part of Iran, public spaces belong to the municipality, and only state-sanctioned artists can use those spaces. The municipality removes all unauthorized artwork, which means that graffiti and other forms of independent art cannot be display in highly trafficked areas, in other words should be tucked in obscure spaces away from the spotlight to not be removed. Obviously in a religion-dominated city like Mashhad, walls and inscribed public messages on walls are closely monitored by the religious sector of the society. The Astan-e Qods, the Sepah e Pasdaran, and the municipality all vigilantly keep an eye on each other. This attitude translates to a complex power struggle within different factions of the government to demonstrate which group is more righteous to decide what is considered *halal*.

Shahnameh Murals created by Sepah-e Pasdaran / Revolutionary Guard



Figure 10: The Simorgh depicted on the Pasdaran complex on Ferdowsi Boulevard between Ferdowsi Square and Janbaz (Veteran) Square.

Source: "A Mural Erased: Urban Art, Local Politics, and the Contestation of Public Space in Mashhad." Posted by: Rustin Zarkar

<http://ajamc.com/2014/03/30/a-mural-erased-urban-art-mashhad/> March 30, 2014



Figure 11: This mural image shows Rostam and Sohrab, created by Sepah-e Pasdaran.

Source: <http://www.carolinemawer.com/whats-new/shahnameh-mashhad/>

The beautification of Mashhad is a testimony to a departure from the war and revolutionary art scenes to scenes of a more normal, everyday life. This is an important matter to note because since 1979 the public arena has been the domain of all kinds of religious and political propaganda imbued with the somber atmosphere of death, martyrdom, and Shohada symbolism. Therefore, in a competitive world of tourism, each city and nation must do their best at a national and international level to improve their image to be creative in terms of how to attract more sustainable economies generated from the tourism

industry. According to a study by the Mashhad municipality (2012) on the subject of urban branding that would change the city's image, one must use the marketing tool that has been tested successfully in various modern cities as well as regions of the world. Thus, the municipality of Mashhad would like to follow the same successful models to improve the city's image [33]. Marketing the image of the city would not be a one-time task but a continuous effort to bring in a regular flow of tourists to visit the city, not only once but on repeated occasions. A visitor's positive experience would serve as an effective tool to recruit future visitors wanting to enjoy the same experience.

The term "place branding" is sometimes synonymous with marketing, which refers to a competition for attracting tourists, visitors, investors, citizens, and internal sources of cities. In other words, urban branding presents an image and package about a place and emphasizes the unique features of the city so that it could surpass other competitors in competition. Urban branding process is continuous [34].

Because of economic and political effects of globalization, competition is fierce between cities to attract tourists, investment, political and business influence, and residents with prosperous potential. Among the challenges of urban management is how the growing city is linked to the construction and the urban brand that a city is developing. The concept of city brand has become one of the most valuable assets that a city can possess. With positive brand, the residents and the city all are beneficiaries of economic prosperity and sustainable revenue [35].

Urban branding is an effective way to alter people's perceptions about a city. In this case, Mashhad's image is primarily associated with religious pilgrimage tourism. However, the Mashhad municipality in a rebranding effort works hard to promote the city as a metropolis with many other urban qualities to be enjoyed in addition to its religious aspect. The vision of the prosperous Mashhad is based on its higher education institutions, its art scenes, its beautiful natural surroundings, its pleasant climate, its parks, and its developed urban areas beside the religious predominance.

Other studies have been undertaken using the element of urban sprawl pattern on cities such as Yazd, Iran (Shahraki, *et al.*, 2011), [36] and in a separate

study researchers used a taxonomy model for city of Isfahan, which is a well-known tourist destination, to identify the cluster of tourist regions within the city (Seifolddini; *et al.* 2009) [37].

In the study simulating urban growth in Mashhad that uses the urban sprawl model (Rafiee, *et al.*, 2009), the authors wanted to understand Mashhad's growth dynamics, to forecast its sprawl for the next two decades, and to provide a basis for urban management [38]. The Rafiee study called out a very important urban management issue that we have already encountered, the dispute between Astan-e Qods and the municipality of Mashhad.

...[In] the case of Mashad City, development is controlled not only by land use planning results, municipality decisions and sparse unharnessed development of built-up areas without regard to these factors but also the Foundation of the Holy Imam Reza Shrine which is rather influential. The SLEUTH model only considers road networks of the set of infrastructure parameters possibly involved in urban expansion [37 p.25].

Eghbali (*et al.*, 2015) emphasize the difficulty to determine a strategy for urban planning in order to create a specific identity for a city. She notes that the marketing planner must consider many aspects of the city and derive a unique way to identify the city. This study is in line with the vision of creating a multiple image for the city of Mashhad by the municipality as mentioned earlier. In most cases, each city has a specific identifiable character that is based on its historical background and the perceived character and values held by its residents. Monavarian (*et al.*, 2013) implemented the urban branding focal points by designing a model that used the city of Mashhad as a case study to understand what is needed to improve the image of the city. His results included a host of variables such as political and institutional environment, financial and social structure (that emphasizes in particular a reduction of bribes) for a successful urban image of Mashhad [39]. Thus far, the city of Mashhad has not been able to execute the urban branding process it desires to achieve, but has a lot of potential for sustainable and national development processes to close the gap of underdevelopment as compared to other nations/cities within the Middle Eastern region.

The positive news is how the Mashhad municipality actively engages in urban research and seeks assistance from experts of private and governmental agencies to attain an improved urban space to be enjoyed by more national and international tourists, thereby boosting its economy, which is second to the capital of Tehran. Eghbali (*et al.*, 2015) has suggested a list of strategic steps to establish Mashhad with an image that would encourage tourists to visit or move. The steps include

promoting a physical-spatial structure which is balanced, moderate, and proportionate to the religious-cultural identity of Mashhad; establishing appropriate facilities to attract more national and trans-national capitals; promoting human development criteria; providing and developing safe and appropriate urban infrastructures, particularly advanced and efficient transportation network, with an emphasis on public transportation; creating a safe social environment; active protection and sustainable utilization of the city's natural environment; and promoting health and safety levels of citizens and pilgrims [39 p. 725].

CONCLUSION

Tourism is a highly lucrative business, especially for countries actively participating and investing in this industry. Many different forms of tourism exist such as pleasure, health, business and pilgrimage. In recent years religious pilgrimage tourism has risen around the world, including tourists who not only like to visit various parts of the world, but also like to travel in conjunction with pilgrimage. Recent studies have focused on Iran as a favorable tourist destination for the Western world and as a Muslim-friendly halal destination. Saudi Arabia has long benefited for being the holiest destination for Muslims in the city of Mecca during the annual pilgrimage of Hajj or trips for performance of Umrah during the year. Saudi Arabia is a good example of a religious tourism industry with annual revenue of \$18 billion.

The recent political disputes between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran caused these two rivals in the region to take political positions opposite to each other in the conflicts raging in Syria and Yemen. The Iranian Government criticized the Government of Saudi Arabia as being responsible for a large number

of pilgrim deaths that occurred in 2015. During the 2015 hajj in Saudi Arabia, 60,000 Iranians travelled to Mecca, and 464 of them were among the total of 2000 dead in a stampede. However,

Tehran has blamed Saudi "mismanagement" for the stampede, which took place after two waves of pilgrims converged on a narrow street, causing hundreds to suffocate or be trampled. "If it were proved that some [authorities] were guilty in this accident, we will not forgive" the loss of our loved ones, said a somber Rouhani, flanked by the heads of the judiciary and parliament as well as the chief of staff of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's office [41].

This incident further escalated tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran suspended participation in the annual hajj for 2016. "Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ali Jannati told the state news agency that negotiations with Saudi Arabia over granting visas and transportation for the hajj had broken down, making it impossible for Iranians to visit Mecca this year" [41]. Iran accused Saudi Arabia "of blocking the path leading to Allah" [42]. This accusation is considered haram by Islamic principles.

However, not all is at a loss, since this incident further provides a business opportunity for the Iranian government to boost promotion of pilgrimage to two major Shi'ia Islam holy cities located in Iran: Ma'somah's Shrine in Qom, and Imam Reza's Shrine in Mashhad. In addition to these well known two pilgrimage locations in Iran, there are other lesser known shrines of Shi'i descent known as Imam Zadeh in different locations around the country. Some are located in tourist cities such as Shiraz with its famous funerary monument and mosque known as Shah-e Chregh which is the tomb of the two brothers Ahmad and Mohammad, sons of Imam Musa al-Kadhim the seventh Shi'i Imam (buried in Iraq). Both Ahmad and Mohammad are brothers of Imam Reza, but they were not considered Imams. The Shah-e Cheragh location became a pilgrimage site in the 14th century. Many Iranians visit Shah-e Cheragh also when they visit the city of Shiraz, which is famous for other unique tourism spotlights.

An estimated \$3 billion not leaving Iran by Iranian pilgrims (who did not attend the annual hajj) has the potential to boost the religious tourism and contribute to

local Iranian economy instead of contributing to the economy of Saudi Arabia. Since the 10th century, Shi'i shrines in Iraq and Iran are highly visited, and for many Shi'a believers, this is due to the difficulty and expense of making the annual hajj to Mecca. Mashhad has the potential to become a great halal tourist destination for visitors worldwide that would contribute to a sustainable Iranian economy. Mashhad also has its internal issues, as discussed earlier, and must find solutions that work across all its agencies toward building a modern halal economy. Mashhad officials have also stated that improvements are needed in other areas in addition to an image improvement. The city lacks adequate tourism infrastructure, such as accommodations, to support the influx of tourists that the government is aiming for, particularly in the area of halal tourism, which requires additional steps for compliance with halal certification. The Iranian government understands the huge economical gains by becoming a member of the global halal certified cities for halal tourism. Thus in 2014 the first step to get closer to this goal was to establish the Halal National & Regional Research Center as a new division in the Agriculture Research Institute. The government investment would be directed to a wide array of tourist-related establishments with the prospect of lucrative economic rewards, with the intention of spreading positive images about Shi'i Iran.

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