



Iran and Russia to Establish Visa Waivers

OE Watch Commentary: In a lengthy interview with the Fars News Agency, an outlet close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Deputy Cultural Minister Vali Teymouri highlights the importance of tourism to Iran, especially as a mechanism to make up revenue lost due to sanctions.

As the accompanying passages from the interview demonstrate, Teymouri argues that the average tourist brings in far more revenue to the country than a single barrel of oil, and that positive experiences within Iran could rapidly increase revenue. For example, he suggests that an average tourist could bring six or seven others to the country, while an unsatisfied tourist could dissuade a dozen others considering making the trip.

In order to jump-start tourism, Teymouri highlights the importance of advertisement, especially for the domestic market, and complains that Iran has yet to tap the full potential of the domestic market. Teymouri's hope for domestic tourism appears unrealistic, as Iranians protesting their economic plight and struggling to put food on the table are unlikely to have disposable income for a beach or mountain vacation.

While Teymouri blames United States sanctions for making travel to Iran more difficult for foreign tourists, he conveniently ignores the fact that Iranian security forces have repeatedly taken US and European citizens hostage to use as pawns in attempts to coerce diplomatic and economic concessions from the West. This reflects a frequent cognitive dissonance among 'reformists' in Iran who are powerless to stop malign security force activities and therefore simply ignore them in analysis. Within Iranian political discourse, speaking critically about the IRGC's domestic role is a redline.

While Fars News headlined the decision to implement visa waivers with Russia, the fact that this appears limited to group travel suggests residual distrust in either Moscow, Tehran, or both about the security risks the citizens of each pose to the other. Russia and Iran might be in the midst of a historic rapprochement, but popular distrust remains in Iran to a country that, up until the mid-twentieth century, had imperial ambitions in Iran. Teymouri suggested that earlier loosening of visa requirements with Oman and Azerbaijan provided a model.

Teymouri notes that Iran has "one million Turkish tourists" now and claims that this has been able to offset the impact of sanctions on tourism. If this is accurate, it is significant, as he suggests that Turkey alone could offset American sanctions. However, the figures Teymouri cites about average revenue per tourist appear optimistic, for it is unrealistic that Iran has raised more than \$1.5 billion from Turkish tourists alone. In reality, Iran may be mitigating shortfalls resulting from European carriers restricting direct flights to Iran and lessening high-end tourism in favor of the lower revenue regional tourist. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**



Russia and Iran draw closer with visa waivers.

Source: Mo'aser.com, <https://www.moaser.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/russia-iran-flags-1-750x430.jpg>

“Visa waivers for group travel [between Iran and Russia] have now been finalized.”

Source: “Lughu Ravadid Iran va Rusiya Bozudi/Haryek Gerdshagir = 25 Bashkeh-e Naft (Iran and Russia Visa Waivers Soon/Each Tourist = 25 Barrels of Oil),” *Fars News Agency*, 23 November 2019. <https://www.farsnews.com/news/13980901000170>

Iran-Russia Visa Waivers Coming

The deputy minister of tourism at the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism for the country said that according to international statistics, each tourist represents on average \$1,485 in revenue, while we sell oil for around \$60 per barrel.

Iran's tourism industry ranks third after oil and automobiles. The economy of many countries in the world relies on tourism and is a huge benefit for the people. Iran can be attractive in all four seasons and has the capacity for tourism in every province. Unfortunately, this economic and monetary potential for the people and the government has for years been ignored, and at present it is not being properly addressed.

...Vali Teymouri, deputy minister of tourism at the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism, spoke in detail about the state of tourism in the country, in the interview below....

When we talk about tourism directly and indirectly, it has an impact on employment and earnings. For example, each tourist impacts 11 jobs, and so this reflects a large volume of employment... Our problem is not only that the budget and support for tourism is low, but also that a kind of national vision, attitude and will are missing in the tourism field.

Until this national will is formed, we will lack the credibility to get anywhere in the field of tourism. Therefore, we must admit that tourism is at the center of development of the country.

Due to the sanctions, there have been no direct flights to our country from several other countries and this is an important factor in tourism today and so our emphasis on the peripheral countries increased. We have been able to attract tourists through land borders if we do not have foreign flights... We have one million Turkish tourists now and this has been able to offset the impact of sanctions on tourism....

One of the World Tourism Organization's recommendations has always been to facilitate the process of issuing visas in order to make it easier for people to travel to other countries... Because of U.S. sanctions, we have had difficulty issuing visas and so in order to remedy this problem and increase visas, we have implemented a number of visa waivers. Over the past few years, we have unilaterally waived visas for Azerbaijan, and this resulted in a 100-fold increase in tourists from Azerbaijan. This was also the case with Oman and the number of tourists increased....

Visa waivers for Russia was agreed three years ago when an agreement was reached and the foreign ministries began working on implementing specific mechanisms and visa waiver for group travel between the two countries has now been finalized and we are determined to implement it as soon as possible....