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Regional Spotlight

Sanctions and tourism: Conceptualisation and implications for destination marketing and management

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1. Introduction and background

Sanctions are a topic of significance to many destinations either as a direct result of their impact or because they affect the relative attractiveness of competitors. Despite this, their roles in destination marketing and management has been given relatively less attention compared to other aspects of the political dimensions of international tourism. This *regional spotlight* aims to introduce their significance, conceptualisation and practical and theoretical implications.

Sanctions have a long history and have been integral to the repertoire of coercive foreign policy measures as a substitute for armed hostilities as a stand-alone policy for centuries (Hufbauer, Schott, Elliott, & Oeggm, 2008; Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 2007; Lopez & Cortright, 2018). "From the Napoleonic wars through World War I, economic sanctions were almost entirely an auxiliary feature of war, loosely governed by customary international law on blockades, contraband, and rights of neutral states" (Hufbauer, 1998, p. 332). Sanctions were a significant policy tool of the European powers and the US. Napoleon, for example, used economic sanctions on the UK, known as the continental system or blockade, to try and damage the UK economically while developing continental industry and trade (Naylor, 2001; Selden, 1999). However, the blockade had only limited impacts on the UK economy with the UK increasing trade elsewhere in the world and arguably negatively affecting some of the European countries, such as the Netherlands, much more (Crouzet, 1964). During the Napoleonic period, the War of 1812 and until entry into World War I, their use by the US reflected international norms that narrowed the scope of definitions of contraband and enlarged the rights of neutrals, although during the Civil War the North took a much broader interpretation against the South (Hufbauer, 1998). The passing of the *Trading with the Enemy Act* by Congress in 1917 gave the US President exceptionally broad powers to freeze foreign assets and regulate international finance and trade that continue to the present day (Hufbauer et al., 2008).

In the inter-war period, the League of Nations introduced the notion of internationally authorised sanctions in actions against Bolivia, Greece and Paraguay. However, it was the failure of sanctions against Italy following their invasion of Ethiopia that substantially contributed to the demise of the League (Hufbauer, 1998). After World War II, the UN sought to formalise a method of managing global security through its Security Council, and since then, it has managed to impose broad multilateral sanctions with varying degrees of success. The post-Cold War period has also witnessed a sharp rise in sanctions imposed on countries given strong domestic desires in many countries to reduce the likelihood of armed conflict while still wishing to take action against perceived infringements of international norms and national security (Cortright & Lopez, 2018).

Sanctions have therefore become a popular tool for exercising foreign policy and economic pressure on targeted actors (Cortright & Lopez, 2018; Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 2007). These are undertaken at the multilateral level (at the UN), regionally (the EU in particular) and unilaterally by a single state (Farrall, 2007; Happpold & Eden, 2019). The nature of the measures imposed has also changed: from comprehensive sanctions regimes (e.g. against Iraq in the 1990s) to more 'targeted' or 'smart' sanctions (e.g. against Iran and Russia), which are directed at specific individuals or entities (through asset freezes and travel bans) or by prohibiting particular activities (arms embargoes and export bans) (Happpold & Eden, 2019). Since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the post-Cold War period has witnessed a dramatic increase in the imposition of sanctions and the US, the UN and the EU in particular have employed sanctions on other nations more than 500 times (Cashen, 2017). Sanctions therefore form a prominent feature of the international relations landscape and have become one of the cornerstones of foreign policy in the absence of armed intervention (Brzoska, 2015; Cortright & Lopez, 2018; Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 2007). According to Farrall (2007), there are two factors which contributed to the rise of sanctions in the aftermath of the Cold War. First, sanctions have come to be viewed as a lower-cost, lower-risk, middle option between

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Table 1
Major UN/Western sanctions.

Sanctioning country	Sanctioning actor				Sanction type
	UN	EU	US	Other ^a	
Iran	a	a	a	a	Financial Travel ban Arms embargo Commodity restriction Aviation/shipping restriction Diplomatic restriction
North Korea	a	a	a	a	Financial Travel ban Arms embargo Commodity restriction Aviation/shipping restriction
Syria		a	a	a	Financial Travel ban Arms embargo Commodity restriction Aviation/shipping restriction Diplomatic restriction
Cuba			a		Financial Travel ban Arms embargo Commodity restriction Aviation/shipping restriction Diplomatic restriction
Russia		a	a	a	Financial Travel ban
Belarus		a	a		Financial Travel ban
Libya	a	a	a	a	Financial Travel ban Arms embargo Aviation/shipping restriction
Myanmar			a		Financial Commodity restriction
Sudan	a	a	a		Financial Travel ban Arms embargo
Ivory Coast	a	a	a	a	Financial Travel ban Arms embargo Commodity restriction
Somalia	a	a	a		Financial Travel ban Arms embargo Commodity restriction
Democratic Republic of Congo	a	a	a	a	Financial Travel ban Arms embargo
Zimbabwe		a	a		Financial Travel ban Arms embargo
Fiji		a	a	a	Financial Travel ban

Source: Derived from Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) (2018); EU (2019); UN (2019).

^a Other countries/governmental bodies.

diplomacy and war (Masters, 2017) and often represent “the least unpalatable of the coercive alternatives available to the UN Security Council when faced with the task of taking action to maintain or restore international peace and security” (Farrall, 2007, p. 3). Second, the effectiveness of sanctions in achieving the policy objectives is perceived to have increased with the growth in inter-connected technology, communication and trade in a globalised world.

The majority of sanctions regimes have targeted state actors and have been imposed for a range of objectives, including compelling an

Table 2
Timeline of main international sanctions against Iran.

Year	Sanctioning actor	Types of sanctions
1979: Hostage crisis at the US embassy in Tehran (turning point in Iran-US Relations)		
1979	US	Asset freeze in US banks
1995	US	Total economic embargo
1996	US	Sanctions against foreign businesses investing in oil and gas
2002: The existence of secret nuclear sites in Iran is revealed		
2006	UN	Nuclear/ballistic missile program, freeze of financial assets, named individuals
2007	UN	Arms sales, financial assets
2008	UN	Assets for joint civilian- military use
	US	Ban on US banks taking intermediary role
2010	UN	Heavy weapons (tanks, missiles, fighter aircraft)
	EU	Oil sector, technology transfer, banking
2011	EU	Assets and specific individuals
2012	EU	Oil embargo, freeze of Iranian central bank's assets, ban on bank-to-bank transactions
2013	US	Ban on automobile sector and Iranian currency Ban on gold and petrochemicals
Nuclear deal of July 2015/suspensions and lifting of economic sanctions		
2018	US	US withdrawal of the deal and returning of sanctions Oil embargo, freeze of Iranian central bank's assets, ban on bank-to-bank transactions Ban on gold and petrochemicals

Source: Seyfi and Hall (2019a; 2019b; 2018a); Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) (2018); Pratt and Alizadeh (2018).

occupying state to withdraw (e.g. Iraq), preventing a state from developing or acquiring weapons of mass destruction (e.g. North Korea, Iran, Iraq), countering international terrorism (e.g. Libya, Sudan, Taliban, Al Qaida, Hariri sanctions regimes), stemming human rights violations (e.g. Southern Rhodesia, South Africa, Haiti), and promoting the implementation of a peace process (e.g. Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast) (Farrall, 2007). Table 1 shows some of the major UN/Western sanctions regimes and the types of sanctions imposed.

Despite their widespread use of economic sanctions and the extensive range and number of sanctions regimes by different international actors applied at different scales, e.g. countries, sectors, products, firms, and individuals, there is considerable debate as to their effectiveness in achieving the desired outcomes of sanctioning bodies (Brzoska, 2015; Hufbauer et al., 2008; Lindsay, 1986; O'Sullivan, 2010; Pape, 1997). Furthermore, the utility of sanctions as a means of regime change is questionable as various countries subjected to sanctions (e.g. Iran, Cuba, North Korea or Zimbabwe) have proven to be extremely resilient to the long-standing economic and political pressures levelled against them (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2013). Smeets (2019, p. 66) observes that:

The number of sanction episodes seems to be on the rise and sanctions have increasingly gained in popularity in recent years and such despite the fact that the literature does not present conclusive evidence that economic sanctions are an effective policy instrument.

According to Hall (2005), sanctions are a type of ‘carrot-and-stick’ diplomacy in dealing with international trade and politics and are often criticised for the devastating impact they can have on innocent civilian populations. Because of growing criticism against the utility of trade sanctions, the international relations landscape has witnessed a ‘qualitative shift’ from comprehensive trade sanctions against states (Drezner, 2011) towards the ‘smart’ or targeted sanctions that are deployed with increasing scope and effect (Cameron, 2003). Smart or targeted sanctions (in the form of asset freeze, travel bans and restrictions on mobility of individuals) arose out of a political critique of more traditional UN Security Council sanctioning regimes as directed at states (de Goede, 2011). This reform in sanctions policy provided the ground for sanctioning actors to use more focused sanctions as a viable alternative to target power elites and ruling classes while imposing less hardship on

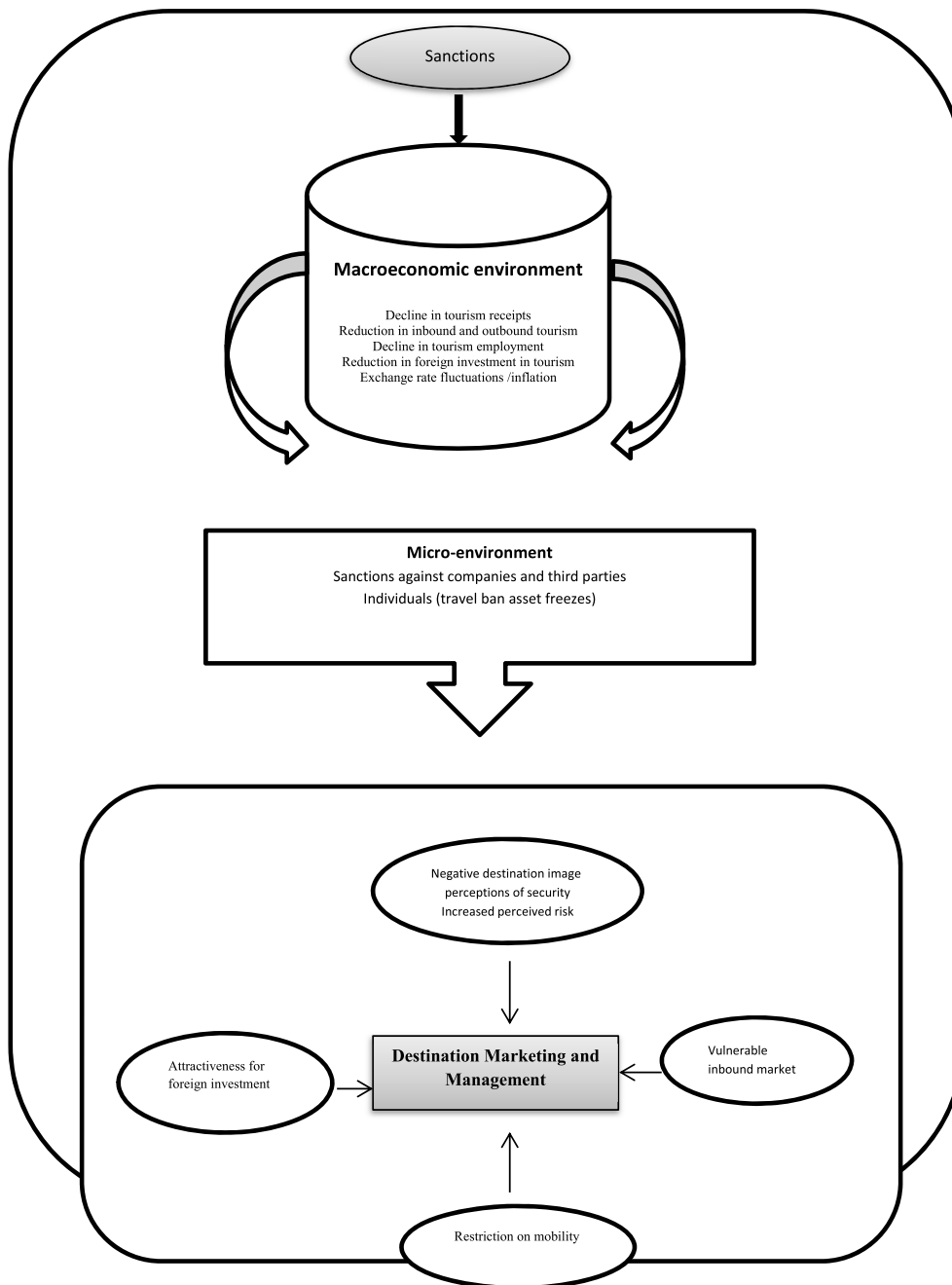


Fig. 1. Sanctions and destination marketing and management.

Source: Authors adapted from Seyfi and Hall (2018b; 2019a; 2019b); Pratt and Alizadeh (2018).

the mass public (Cortright & Lopez, 2018). This has been seen in the cases of UN sanctions against Taliban, ISIL, and other terrorist groups as well as sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea and US sanctions targeted some top Iranian officials (Wong, 2019).

Although the rationale behind sanctions as a foreign policy element is often to encourage people in sanctioned countries to actively influence their government they often fail to do so and are often regarded as an attack on the independence of the targeted country rather than just the political leadership (Seyfi & Hall, 2019b). Drezner (2011) acknowledges this and comments:

Research emanating from wildly disparate theoretical and methodological perspectives came to the same conclusion about the effect of comprehensive sanctions: they disproportionately hurt politically weak groups and benefited target regime sympathizers (p. 99)

Using a feminist approach, Buck, Gallant, and Nossal (1998) also argued that the costs of trade sanctions are disproportionately imposed on women, who are often the most powerless political actors in the target country. Furthermore, in a sanctions environment, public spending priorities often change and public resources shift to defence equipment and personnel to enhance the coercive capacity of the targeted leadership. As a result, other areas such as environment or production remain secondary while the focus is maintaining the ruling structure and sovereignty and ensuring regime survival (Brzoska, 2015; Seyfi & Hall, 2019).

Drawing heavily on the period between World Wars I and II, Agamben's (2005) analysis of state sovereignty and the 'state of exception' has been extremely influential as a way of theorising contemporary state violence, suggesting that the use of emergency powers has radically undermined the rule of law. Interestingly, such a critique

goes hand-in-hand with the growth of sanctions as a foreign policy tool and their subsequent analysis from critical perspectives. For example, [de Goade \(2011\)](#) draws upon the work of [Agamben \(2005\)](#) to provide an interpretation of blacklisting and targeted sanctions in terms of their symbolic function of banishment and exclusion. As a result, she argues that the pre-emptive nature of sanctions as a security measure redraw the boundaries around normal, valued, ways of life. Similarly, [Bhungalia \(2010\)](#) examines the socio-spatial practices surrounding the implications of the Israeli government's 'hostile entity' classification for the Gaza Strip, Israel's foremost sanctions policy, and argues this counter-insurgency action "entails regulation and management of the Palestinian body combined with the active subjugation of Palestinian life to the power of death" ([Bhungalia, 2010](#), p. 347). Nevertheless, the application of Agamben's arguments regarding the crisis of legality and the 'state of exception' to indefinitely restricted rights such as that occur under sanctions remains contested. For example, [Agamben \(2005](#), p. 14) himself noted that "the declaration of the state of exception has been gradually replaced by an unprecedented generalisation of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government", thereby raising significant questions regarding the applicability of Agamben's thesis to contemporary international sanctions regimes. [McLoughlin \(2012](#), p. 705) even suggests there is a "need to rethink what is at stake in Agamben's account of the crisis of legality: not only a politics of state violence and permanent emergency, but also the more quotidian problem of administration and regulation".

Sanctions have significant implications for travel and tourism ([Seyfi & Hall, 2018a, 2019a, 2019b](#); [Hall, 1994](#); [Seyfi, Hall, & Kuhzady, 2019](#)). Amongst the direct effects are restrictions on international mobility, e.g. the longstanding sanctions by the US on travel by its citizens to Cuba; restrictions on companies, which can include airlines and accommodation providers, operating in another country; the exporting of software and technology for tourism and hospitality; trade with foreign subsidiaries of sanctioned countries' companies in third countries; and blocking access to international financial institutions. Indirect effects include negative impacts on destination image, difficulty in undertaking currency transactions and attracting project finance ([Seyfi & Hall, 2018a; 2019a, 2019b](#)). All of these have a substantial impact on tourism in destinations affected by sanctions in terms of destination management and marketing.

Situated at the intersection of politics, international trade, travel and tourism ([Butler & Suntikul, 2017](#); [Hall, 2005](#)), sanctions have primarily been explored within the political science, economic, and public policy frameworks ([Cortright & Lopez, 2018](#); [Galtung, 1967](#); [Lindsay, 1986](#); [O'Sullivan, 2010](#)). Notwithstanding the widespread use of sanctions and their far-reaching impacts on tourism and hospitality, there are surprisingly few studies that explicitly examine the effect of sanctions on tourism in the target destination or firm and existing knowledge is limited as to how tourism in countries exposed to sanctions is affected and continues to operate or its flow-on effects to third countries. A review by [Hall \(2017\)](#) shows that sanctions have not been noted as a significant theme in the tourism and geopolitics literature, despite the significance of politics and foreign policy in relation to tourism as well as the mobility of individuals within geopolitical systems ([Hall, 2017](#)).

This *regional spotlight* focuses on Iran, which is an especially interesting case given that it has been the subject of one of the largest, longest and toughest sanctions regime in history ([Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018](#); [Seyfi & Hall, 2019b](#); [Takeyh & Maloney, 2011](#)). This *regional spotlight* is also timely given the most recent re-imposition of sanctions by the US against Iran after a short spell of relaxation in the light of Iran's nuclear deal of 2015 ([Seyfi & Hall, 2018b](#)) and the potential implications for tourism of the current instability within the Gulf region. By taking Iran as an example, this research therefore aims to construct a composite picture of the interactions between sanctions and tourism destination and conclusions about the implications of such connections for destination marketing and management.

2. Methodology

This study employs an inductive qualitative approach ([Maxwell, 2005](#)) to probe the complex relationships between the sanctions and tourism, and the effects of such changes on tourism destination marketing and management. Secondary data were first identified and then collected. In addition, to academic sources, these included the national and international organisations statistics about Iran (e.g. the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Statistical Center of Iran and Iran's central bank's annual reports), along with the sanctioning actors (United Nations Security Council, EU Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), and the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Other tourism-related sources of information included United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) reports. This was then followed by a further iterative search for materials that were not otherwise identified in the original search. Once the sources were identified and gathered, they were analysed in line with the research questions using content analysis. Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique which engages in naturalistic inquiry, studying real-world settings inductively to generate rich narrative descriptions and construct research insights ([Patton, 2005](#)). The method is used frequently in the social sciences and is a well-established research method in tourism studies ([Hall, 2018](#)). The study is also complemented with data gathered as part of wider research during periods of fieldwork in Iran.

3. Sanctions and tourism in Iran

Iran has been subject to sanctions by individual nations and international bodies since 1979 ([Farahani & Shabani, 2013](#); [Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018](#); [Takeyh & Maloney, 2011](#)). As of the time of writing, the US has nearly 8000 sanctions in place worldwide, with Iran by far the largest state target of US sanctions ([Gilsinan, 2019](#)). Since the upheavals of the late 1970s that ousted Iran's pro-American monarchy and eventually replaced it with a theocracy hostile to the West, the US has sought to temper Iran's geopolitical ambitions through a range of foreign policy instruments, including economic sanctions ([Takeyh & Maloney, 2011](#)). Since the early 1980s and following the 1979–1981 hostage crisis these instruments have grown in their stringency. [Table 2](#) shows the timeline of the main international sanctions against Iran from their first imposition in 1979 following the hostage crisis to the more recent sanctions in President Trump' administration aiming to cut Iranian oil exports (which makes up over 80% of government budget) to zero as a part of a strategy to change Iran's behaviour and to curb Iran's projection of regional power ([Hall & Seyfi, 2018](#)).

Although Iran's landmark nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) achieved in 2015 could resolve a long-running dispute over Iran's nuclear enrichment programme, new sanctions were reintroduced following the withdrawal of the US from the nuclear deal with Iran in 2018 as part of an attempted strategy of regime containment and change. The tourism industry was among the first industry to witness an immediate growth in the light of the removal of sanctions against Iran in 2015 and Iran became a booming international tourism destination. More than five million inbound tourists visited Iran in 2017, nearly three times the number in 2009, in the light of this easing of sanctions, European airlines such as Air France, British Airways and Lufthansa and regional airlines, such as Air Asia, resumed direct flights to the country and there was a considerable investment in tourism-related infrastructure ([Khodadadi, 2018](#); [Seyfi & Hall, 2018b](#)). Yet this prosperity came to an end in the climate of rising regional tensions and the re-imposition of sanctions against Iran by President Trump's administration.

4. Sanctions and challenges of destination marketing and management

Tourism and hospitality are profoundly affected by sanctions, as Fig. 1 illustrates. At the macro level, both the supply and demand side of the targeted economy is affected by sanctions with direct impacts on the tourism industry. Sanctions direct affect tourism arrivals which then leads to a decline in tourism receipts and associated employment levels (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018). Sanctions also usually have a disproportionate effect on the general populace, rather than the targeted government or persons. Many of the affected are middle class people who are consumers of tourist services. At the macro level, the role of the state is of obvious significance to tourism. However, at the micro-level the geopolitical dimensions of displacement, hospitality, and the attempted constraint of “mobilities and border crossing clearly offer insights into the political imaginary of territory, tourism and space” (Hall, 2017, p. 20).

Over time, sanctions usually have a negative impact on economic growth and result in significant inflationary pressures. The consequential impacts on the purchasing power of people in the sanctioned country then have flow-on effects for domestic tourism and outbound travel. As a result of the sanctions, Iranian workers lost 90% of their purchasing power over the sanctions period (Seyfi & Hall, 2018b). It is also estimated that over 25% of Iranians were living below the absolute poverty line and 30% under the relative poverty line in 2016 (Kokabisaghi, 2018).

The psychological effects of sanctions contribute to a negative destination image and increased perceived risk to travellers which, in turn, contribute to lower tourist arrivals overall, including from non-sanctioning countries (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018). Countries exposed to sanctions therefore have to cope with the consequences of being portrayed in the media of sanctioning countries and their allies as destinations which are dangerous and/or unstable (Hall, 1994, 2017). This can then create a perception that visitors may be highly vulnerable and subject to local sensitivities on political matters (Hall & Seyfi, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019b). Risk perceptions can influence tourist decision-making and destination choice as well as investment decisions, with substantial negative economic consequences for sanctioned destinations which may take years to overcome (Avraham, 2015; Hall, 2005). For example, international companies have been reluctant to do business with Iran for fear of losing access to larger Western markets (Khodadadi, 2018). In response, at both national and regional scales, Iranian tourism organisations as well as individual businesses have therefore tried to convey images that provide reassurance in international tourists as to the safety of the destination and the quality of hospitality that visitors receive. In addition, emphasis has been placed on trying to attract visitors from markets that are relatively unaffected by sanctions regimes such as China and Turkey, as well as European markets. Although tourism is largely affected by sanctions, it is sometimes adopted as a means of survival through foreign currency generating and employment. Arguably, Cuba is a clear example where a country sanctioned by the US has used positive diplomatic relationships with countries such as Canada and Spain to develop its tourism industry. However, such cases reflect the potential for how sanctioned countries may be forced into acute financial and political dependency on ‘friendly nations’ (Alipour & Kilic, 2005), which, in the case of Iran include Russia, China and neighboring countries which may ignore American sanctions. Attracting members of the diaspora, whose size can be substantial and may be one of the least impacted markets that are influenced by sanctions and the publicity surrounding them, is also another tourism related adaptation to sanctions regimes. However, the degree of pressure from sanctions and national responses may well also begin to cut into these markets the longer the sanctions regimes continue (Seyfi & Hall, 2019b).

Iran provides a good example of some of the problems which sanctions pose for tourism. The opening of Iran to international tourism

in 2015 was perceived as supporting the efforts of the more liberal elements of the government to build bridges with Western countries. Ironically, the reintroduction of sanctions by President Trump’s administration has therefore served to reinforce the more hardline and conservative members of the theocracy as well as provide a basis for greater domestic control (Agence France-Presse, 2018). In such a situation, tourism is still possible but has become more limited in scope than ever before, and is instead focused more on visiting friends and relatives, pilgrimage, and limited cultural and heritage tourism, rather than being more inclusive of both domestic and international tourism activities.

Subject to sanctions for more than 35 years, Iran’s reputation as an international tourist destination had all but disintegrated, only to receive a brief period of growth and revival in-between sanction regimes (Khodadadi, 2018). Tourism is often portrayed as a force for peace. However, there is little that tourism appears able to do in response to comprehensive sanctions regimes such as those Iran experiences from the US. The case of sanctions in Iran therefore highlights both the significance of sanctions for their effects on international tourism as well as the extent to which the tourism system is embedded within the US economic and legal system. Both issues that have been relatively ignored in destination marketing and management but are crucial to understanding the international flow of tourism investment as well as the constraints faced by some countries in seeking to expand international tourism.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100381>.

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