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## **Challenges that face cultural tourism in post-conflict regions: the case of Kurdistan**

*Kadhim Braim, Dr Scott McCabe, Dr Jillian Rickly and Dr Mohamed Gadi*

### **Abstract**

Tourism has multiple economic benefits for host countries that receive tourists. Policy makers are becoming more and more aware of the importance that appropriate tourism management has to maximise the benefits that tourism flows can bring. However, many developing countries suffer from a lack of an integrated tourism policy. Particular issues are faced in those countries that are dealing with local conflicts (sometimes over many years). These countries often lack investment in tourism resources even though they might have a huge potential and are rich in heritage and cultural assets. Thus, there is much opportunities to develop tourism sectors in countries that rich in cultural tourism. However, in Kurdistan is no proper consideration to cultural heritage conservation in order to protect them from damage and prepared for tourism purpose.

Tourism and tourism related issues have been widely studied in both developed and developing countries. However, little research has been carried on challenges of cultural heritage conservation in post conflict areas which can be considered the main barriers of developing cultural tourism. This paper aims to fill this gap and provides a picture of challenges that face cultural conservation as the main barriers of developing cultural tourism in Kurdistan, it discusses the reasons behind the less attention to cultural heritage conservation in Kurdistan, and explores the impact of conflict and instability on cultural heritage conservation and potential of cultural tourism growth. By looking of the perspective of different stakeholders in cultural heritage industry, the study can understand the challenges in protecting cultural heritage site. The paper reports data from a series of in-depth interviews sessions with policy makers and local business operators in Erbil, Kurdistan, in 2015.

Today, cultural tourism has become a topic of concern for many researchers and organizations because of its core role in the tourist development. However, especially in the aftermath of conflicts, it is necessary to preserve the cultural resources of a nation, not only for economic reasons, but also for the moral obligation towards future generations. Kurdistan region is rich in cultural resources, which have not been properly protected from damage (e.g. Erbil Citadel, Choli Minaret, Khanzad -Banaman Citadel, Barsireen Bridge, and The Great Pasha Citadel). This study explores the challenges that face conservation as the main issues behind underdevelopment of cultural tourism in Kurdistan.

## **1. Introduction:**

Tourism industry has a multiple beneficial if government succeed in managing and planning their tourism sector effectively. According to WTTC (2015), the international commerce volume of tourism has contributed approximately 10% of global GDP, and provided 9.1% of total global employment in 2014. In general, tourism development is affected by the change in political situation. Seddighi, Nuttall & Theocharous (2001) noted that tourism consider weak industry due highly sensitive to political instability which has a notable negative impact on tourist destinations, with the potential to turn thriving tourist destinations into non-attractive destinations. More precisely, Richter (1999) claim that tourism only grows in stable societies, he claim although Philippines, Sri Lanka and Pakistan rich in attractive enjoyable tourism resources, including cultural attractions, mountains, beautiful beaches, cultural diversity, multi ethnic groups and religions, however political instability considered main challenge to tourism development in these three Asian countries. Another example of conflict situations that influences tourism industry is Kurdistan region in Iraq. In 2013, total tourist arrivals reached 2,952,027, while this decreased to 1,529,434 in 2014 and 1,117,501 in 2015, respectively (KRG General Board of Tourism, 2015, 2016). This 48% drop in 2014 and 62% in 2015 compared to 2013 was clearly a result of the war against Islamic State (Daesh).

In term of cultural tourism contributions in tourism sector, Robinson & Picard (2006) reported that a large proportion of international tourism is based around historic buildings and heritage sites, such as the Taj Mahal in India, the contents of the Louvre in Paris, or city destinations such as Venice. Such sites can transform very readily into tourist destinations because of their universal value and having a prominent place from the perspective of tourists. The World Tourism Organization estimates that visiting cultural attractions accounts for 37% of all tourism in the world, including historical monuments and buildings, museums, galleries and performing arts centres, conservatories, zoos and aquariums (Boyd, 2002; McKercher and Cross, 2002). Furthermore, these figures reached approximately 40% in 2007 of all international tourist arrivals (OECD, 2009). This means cultural tourism in general and cultural heritage sites in particular play a prominent role in increasing the number of tourists and consequently enhancing tourism development. These figures might encourage nations that rich in cultural resources to enhance tourism sector and invest in this field; this might be in a particular interest to nations like Kurdistan to invest in CULTURAL TOURISM. However, Kurdistan has not utilized these valuable resources yet for tourism purpose. The main reason is inappropriate programs or unimplemented plans for cultural conservation. This study tend to highlight the issues related to cultural

conservations in Kurdistan, the reason behind unmanaged these vital sources for the purpose of tourism.

## ***2. Tourism development in Kurdistan***

All cities in Kurdistan, without exception, were subjected to policies of exclusion and neglect during the successive Iraqi governments since 1925 until 1968. Svatuková & Nováček (2010) observed that archaeological and cultural heritage sites in Kurdistan have been left to neglect and demolition. However, the KRG started a program to restore cultural heritage sites, e.g., in 2006, government start to set a plan for rebuild Erbil Citadel to preserve its national values, which is a unique historic town in the world. The Erbil Citadel Town is located in the centre of the city of Erbil on the top of an artificial earthen mound rising 32 meters, which is believed it have been continuously inhabited for 7000 years or more, however, this program has not continued and Citadel has ignored now. The rationale for this study is cultural heritage site in Kurdistan are not protected from damages to be used for tourism purpose, which the study explore the reason behind unsuccessful protection plan. Tourism resources in particular cultural resources are not used correctly in post-conflict areas while there is a compelling necessity to maximize these resources as part of the general need for economic development. In addition, Erbil Citadel was recently placed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites in 2014. World heritage sites in the UNESCO list can be used like a branding system for the city of Erbil, since being listed maximizes the brand potential of a case like this.

## ***3. Methodology***

This section gives a brief background of qualitative data method with the particular focus on in-depth interviews that have been used in this study for data collection. By the 1970s, qualitative methods had emerged as a serious and proper approach adopted in research studies across a range of disciplines, including some that traditionally depended on the use of experiments to understand human behaviour such as social psychology (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Jennings (2005) stated that the researcher equally assesses all perspectives in qualitative methodology, and interprets the data without giving particular interest to one position amongst others. Snape & Spencer (2003) reported that qualitative methods are suitable to explore complex issues and to respond to the research questions that require understanding social phenomena.

Jennings (2005) cited that from the 1970s the interviews method attracted researchers' attention as a method of conducting research in the social science studies, including the tourism field. According to Clark et al. (1998), "The interview as a form of collecting qualitative data is at its most useful when it gives us insight into how individuals or groups think about their world, how they construct the 'reality' of that world" and always gives an opportunity to the participants to make an additional comments. Mack et al (2005) reported that In-depth interviews methods gives experience and skills to both parties, offers a chance to the participants to deliver their thought freely and naturally, and offers an opportunity to the researcher to engage with the people who have a certain personal skills.

The rationale of using in-depth interview method in this study is that the method allows the researcher to freely ask about the specific points that might arise during the in-depth interview session and gives an opportunity for participants to talk freely; this helps the researcher to get as much information as possible. This method allows the researcher to get full explanatory answer through a flexible tools such as follow up questions which might help to generate new knowledge and put forward new opinions or solutions for a particular problems selected over the interview. It flexible to explore relevant issues might arise by the interviewee. Mack et al (2005) cited that in-depth interviews became a popular qualitative method because of its effectiveness in offering a human face to the research process, allowing the interchange of skills and experience between participants and the researcher.

The main aim of this research is to explore issues of cultural heritage protection in post conflict areas, and to set a careful planning and strategy for preserving cultural heritage site in Kurdistan in order to cultural tourism development. To achieve these aims, the study undertake in-depth interviews with 17 participants including government who represented tourism industry and antiquities, and business tourism operators (see table 1). All in-depth interviews sessions were implemented held in Erbil in April 2015, and sessions were between 25 and 90 minutes long. The study used Ground Theory method for developing themes and sub-themes from data gathered. The data coding procedure based on Ground Theory consisted of three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Daengbuppha, Hemmington & Wilkes, 2006: Kong, 2010: Tan, Kung & Luh, 2013: Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The study used manual coding process and NVIVO software program for open coding stage, and then the same procedure applied for the following two stages of data coding; axial and selective coding steps.

**Table 1: In-depth interviews participant**

category	Participants' Name	Interviewee Code Name	Date Held	Position
senior experts and policy makers: Ministry of Culture and Youth	Kannan Mufti	PT1	14/4/2015	General Manager at Ministry of Culture and Youth (MCY)
senior experts and policy makers: Antiques Directorate	Mala Awat	PT2	16/4/2015	General Directorate of Antiquities
senior experts and policy makers: Architect and Archaeology	Dara Al-Yaqubi	PT6	26/3/2015	Head of High Commission of Erbil Citadel Revitalisation (HCECR)
senior experts and policy makers: Antiques Directorate	Nader Babakr Mohamed	PT8	6/4/2015	Director of Erbil Directorate of Antiquities
senior experts and policy makers: Tourism Directorate	Nader Rosty	PT12	26/3/2015	Head of Media Department in General Board of Tourism in Kurdistan
experts and practitioners: Antiques Directorate	Ahmed Jawdat	PT4	14/4/2015	Head of Erbil Museum Department at Erbil Directorate of Antiques
experts and practitioners: Antiques Directorate	Sabir Hasan Husen	PT5	15/4/2015	Head of Information and Cultural Department at Erbil Antiques Directorate
experts and practitioners: Antiques Directorate	Rafiq Rasul Sofi	PT9	8/4/2015	Head of Information of Antiques Department at General Directorate of Antiquities
experts and practitioners: Antiques Directorate	Valentine Abdulrahman Ali	PT10	8/4/2015	Head of Planning Department at General Directorate of Antiquities
experts and practitioners: Antiques Directorate	Muhammad Lashkri Khdir	PT11	5/4/2015	Head of Museum Department at General Directorate of Antiquities
experts and practitioners: Antiques Directorate	Jamal Jamil As'ed	PT3	8/4/2015	Department of Antiques Administrative at General Directorate of Antiquities
experts and practitioners: Tourism Directorate	Nariman Fazil	PT7	20/3/2015	Head of Media Department at Erbil General Directorate of Tourism
Tourist Business Operators	Seerwan Abdul-Rahman Shahab	PT13	6/4/2015	owner of Al-Mudaris for Travel and Tourism, and Hotel Al-Mudaris
Tourist Business Operators	Lolan Mustafa	PT14	8/4/2015	General Manager of "Kurdish Textile Museum"
Tourist Business Operators	Karim Shexani	PT15	9/4/2015	Manager of "Erbil Antiques Stores"
Tourist Business Operators	Kalis antique	PT16	30/3/2015	Manager of "khalis antique shop"
Tourist Business Operators	Fars AL-Katb	PT17	13/4/2015	General Manager of "Best in Erbil Hotel"
Tourist Business Operators	Sudad	PT18	12/4/2015	General Manager of "hotel quartz"
Tourist Business Operators	Ary	PT19	12/4/2015	General Manager of "Wlat Hotel"

#### **4. Results and conclusion**

There is a great opportunity to develop cultural tourism if there is a proper management to preserve and protect cultural attractions, because Kurdistan rich in cultural and cultural heritage sites. However, Kurdistan still has not been successful in protecting and utilizing cultural resources. Example, PT8 believed that Kurdistan has not finished the restoration and conservation program for any cultural heritage sites in order to be used by third parties for tourism purposes, even if prepared; there is a regulation barrier to proper deal with these resources. PT1 mentioned that even government planning for Erbil Citadel had been stalled. This means there is no enough consideration to deal with cultural tourism resources in terms of protecting them from damage and to be used for tourism purpose. The study highlights the potential reasons behind unprotecting cultural heritage site in Kurdistan.

Directorate of antiquities face authority limitation related to rights of supervising and dealing with cultural heritage site, historical building and other tangible and intangible cultural resources. This barrier might cause the loss of many tangible and intangible cultural resources, and also underutilise these resources properly. PT12 claimed that there is mixed or interactive work between governmental directorates in Kurdistan, which some cultural resources run by MCY, and some by Antiquities Directorate and other parties. The second can be seen in PT8' opinion, which claims that there are no laws or regulations giving the right or authority to Directorate of Antiquities to give these kinds of buildings to others, or rent them to the private sector.

Erbil Citadel is only example that has enough authority and has its own administrative board to supervise the Erbil Citadel restoration plan. The board linked directly with the Council of Ministers and Erbil Governorate. PT6 which is the head of Erbil Citadel revitalisation team claims that:

*"We have a council board and a management board, we run our organization such as any other normal organisation... we meet every month or every two months. In the meetings, we set strategies and discuss important issues, but the details or our daily obligations are done directly in the Citadel, so we do not have authority barriers" IVG6*

Erbil Citadel management as example of successful cultural management in Kurdistan could be applied to all cultural heritage sites under Antiquities Directorate supervision.

Another limitation of responsibility mentioned by PT8 which claim that Antiquity Directorate now supervise and protect archaeological site and antiquities that are over 200 years old only. PT11 claimed that according to regulation, Antiquities Directorate currently just responsible to manage and protecting archaeological site, but other

tangible cultural resources, example, handicraft cultural products is out of Directorate of Antiquities' responsibility.

The study revealed that there were no complete record lists for all cultural resources in Kurdistan, which might be considered one of the challenges to conservation. In this regard, PT6 reported that Kurdistan has not identified and organised all cultural resources yet. PT10 suggested that the government should allocate an appropriate budget for a plan that exists now to record all cultural heritage resources. Thus, it can be argued that, currently, there is no final lists approved exist for all cultural heritage site in Kurdistan, which needs to be addressed. This is largely attributable to the continuing conflict in the region, which reduced the government's ability to allocate sufficient funds and enough care for all sectors in Kurdistan. Thus, Kurdistan should determine cultural resources, record them, and then conserve them in order to benefit from them for tourism purposes and to make them sources of income.

In addition, financial issues are a fundamental challenge to all aspects of cultural tourism development in Kurdistan, as highlighted under many of the previous points. The conflict with the Iraqi government precipitated the funding crisis, which prevents investment in cultural tourism development, which is considered a dispensable luxury given the critical situation facing the KRG. This is causes ignorance of many cultural heritage sites.

Another problem is evacuating cultural heritage site without maintaining program. PT11 stated there are three empty cultural residential districts adjacent to Erbil Citadel and are now state-owned. Which he believed that every empty building will suffer damage, and if the government use these buildings carefully will maintain and protect them.

on the other hand, there were perspectives consider the positive role of cultural tourism in cultural conservations in parallel of economic purposes, PT11 believed that cultural tourism is beneficial both economically and in terms of protecting inherent cultural resources.

*"I think transferring cultural heritage resources and any cultural resources into tourist attractions has advantages for conservation of these resources in addition to the economic advantages" IVG11*

Moreover, PT3 supports cultural tourism not only for revenue creation but also so they maintain their intrinsic value as artefacts with which humans interact.

*"if cultural resources, in particular historical buildings, are not used to attract visitors then they lose their value – if nobody visits them, they do not have value" IVG3*



In addition, PT8 believed that cultural resources are national inheritance and should be protected from damage, however, he supports cultural tourism.

*"Cultural resources are national inheritance, we cannot determine the value of these resources; if we lose them we cannot restore or return them, and they have sentimental and material value. Materially, we can benefit from them, invest in them, and people can benefit from them" IVG8*

In conclude, there are number of reason behind lack of cultural tourism, the most series impact is conservation. in Kurdistan, there is a wealth of cultural resources, but only a limited number of cultural heritage site have received serious investment, however, even these are not well organised for tourism purposes.

Authority limitation, legislations issues, no complete record lists, lack of funding, and evacuating cultural heritage site are the major barriers of cultural conservation. The government should apply a new regulations regarding cultural heritage conservation in a way that Directorate of Antiquities able to deal with all cultural heritage resource. The government should allocate proper budget to be used for conservation program

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