

Tourism governance and political economic control: Public policy, SMEs, and digital regulation in Iran and Türkiye

Mehdi Afrash

Tourism PhD Researcher; Tourism and Hotel Management School, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

*Correspondence: Mehdi.Afrash@Autonoma.cat

Abstract

Governments across the Middle East frequently promote tourism as a driver of national development, yet local communities often absorb its costs while receiving limited returns, a pattern shaped by the political distribution of tourism opportunities. Existing research has given little attention to why local communities and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) remain marginal within tourism policymaking. This study compares Iran, a petro state, and Türkiye, a tourism dependent economy, to examine how public policy positions local communities within tourism development. Drawing on a qualitative archival methodology, it analyzes national development plans and tourism policy documents from both countries through qualitative content analysis conducted in NVivo across four dimensions: national development planning, community and private sector participation, the relationship between SMEs and state affiliated organizations, and digital governance. The findings show that governments do more than regulate tourism; they shape access to tourism markets, digital infrastructure, institutional support, and investment opportunities through a pattern of selective market inclusion. In both countries, policymakers prioritize state interests over community level benefits, reflecting a form of state capitalism that channels resources toward politically connected actors and quasi governmental organizations while leaving SMEs and local communities with limited institutional and digital support. Although Iran and Türkiye differ substantially in their political economic structures and dependence on tourism revenue, the comparative analysis demonstrates that contrasting systems can converge on similar governance outcomes. The study extends political economy debates by conceptualizing tourism policy as an instrument through which states allocate market access, regulate participation, and reproduce political authority.

Keywords: Digital Governance, Iran, Political Economy, Private Sector, Public Policy, QUANGOs, SMEs, Tourism, Türkiye

JEL Classification: L83, L88, O25, P16, D73

1. Introduction

Tourism has long been regarded as an instrument of economic development, regional competitiveness, and employment creation. Governments increasingly incorporate tourism into national development strategies with the expectation that it will stimulate investment, diversify economic activity, and improve local welfare. Within this perspective, tourism public policy is generally understood as a mechanism for facilitating sustainable development, supporting private-sector participation, and promoting community engagement. However, whether tourism policies achieve these objectives remains contested, particularly in political systems where state interests dominate economic decision-making. Although a substantial body of tourism literature has examined destination management, tourism planning, and public policy, considerably less attention has been devoted to the political economy of tourism governance. Existing studies primarily evaluate tourism policies in terms of competitiveness, sustainability, or marketing performance while giving limited attention to how governments employ tourism as an instrument of political authority, economic regulation, and institutional control. As a result, the relationship between tourism governance, state power, and the distribution of tourism opportunities among local communities and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) remains insufficiently understood.

This gap is particularly significant in authoritarian and hybrid political systems, where public policy reflects broader political and ideological priorities alongside economic objectives. In such contexts, tourism development may extend beyond attracting visitors and generating revenue to become a mechanism through which governments regulate market access, shape investment patterns, reinforce institutional legitimacy, and consolidate political authority. Consequently, the benefits of tourism may become concentrated among state-affiliated organizations or politically connected actors, while local communities and independent SMEs receive comparatively limited opportunities to participate in tourism markets. Against this background, this study investigates these dynamics through a comparative analysis of Iran and Türkiye. The two countries provide an analytically valuable comparison because they represent contrasting economic structures while sharing important institutional characteristics. Iran represents a classic petro-state, where hydrocarbon revenues have historically reduced dependence on tourism as a source of national income. Türkiye, by contrast, has become one of the world's leading tourism destinations and relies substantially on tourism revenues to support economic growth. Despite these differences, both countries have developed centralized governance structures in which tourism policy is closely connected to broader state objectives, allowing an assessment of whether contrasting economic models nevertheless produce similar patterns of tourism governance. Rather than evaluating tourism policy, which functions through selective market inclusion, solely through visitor numbers or economic performance, this study examines how national development plans conceptualize the roles of local communities, SMEs, digital infrastructure, and public participation. Particular attention is given to whether tourism policies create opportunities for decentralized market



participation or reinforce centralized systems of political-economic control. The analysis also considers how digital governance—including internet regulation and information and communication technology (ICT) policy—affects the capacity of tourism enterprises to participate in domestic and international markets.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative archival approach based on the systematic analysis of national development plans, tourism strategies, and official policy documents produced by the Islamic Republic in Iran and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments in Türkiye. These documents were examined through qualitative content analysis using NVivo software, allowing comparison across four analytical dimensions: (1) tourism public policy and national development planning; (2) the position of local communities and the private sector; (3) the relationship between SMEs, quasi-non-governmental organizations (QUANGOs), and state-supported enterprises; and (4) digital governance and ICT support for tourism development. The paper argues that tourism policy in both Iran and Türkiye performs functions extending beyond tourism development itself, it in fact functions through selective market inclusion as well. Although the two countries differ considerably in their levels of tourism dependence and institutional organization, their policy frameworks reveal important similarities in how tourism is incorporated into broader systems of political-economic governance. In both cases, tourism policy prioritizes state objectives over community empowerment, leaving SMEs and local communities in comparatively marginal positions within national development strategies. The findings contribute to the tourism governance literature by demonstrating that tourism policy operates not only as an instrument of economic development but also as a mechanism through which governments regulate markets, allocate economic opportunities, select market inclusion, and reinforce political authority.

By integrating perspectives from tourism governance, political economy, and public policy, this study contributes to debates on the relationship between tourism development and state power. More broadly, it argues that analyses of tourism policy should move beyond conventional indicators of growth and competitiveness to examine how political institutions shape the distribution of tourism opportunities, the role of local communities, and the governance of tourism markets.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political and Policy Context

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran adopted a centralized political system in which national development planning operates under the strategic direction of the Supreme Leader and institutions such as the Expediency Discernment Council. Tourism policy is therefore integrated into broader ideological and economic planning and has historically occupied a secondary position within a hydrocarbon- dependent economy.

Türkiye has followed a different economic trajectory. Since the early 2000s, successive AKP governments have incorporated tourism into national development strategies as a priority sector for economic growth, employment, and international competitiveness. At the same time, policymaking has become increasingly centralized, allowing tourism to function not only as an economic instrument but also as part of broader state strategies concerning investment, national image, and foreign policy. Although the two countries differ substantially in economic structure and dependence on tourism revenues, both exhibit centralized policy systems that provide an appropriate basis for comparative analysis of tourism governance.

2.2 Tourism Governance, Public Policy, and Political Economy

Tourism public policy comprises the governmental decisions, regulations, and institutional arrangements that shape tourism development while balancing economic, social, cultural, and environmental objectives (Fayos-Solà & Bueno, 2005). However, tourism policy is not politically neutral, it functions through selective market inclusion. Hall (2008) argues that tourism planning reflects broader systems of governance in which political institutions determine not only development priorities but also the allocation of resources and opportunities. Similarly, Tosun and Jenkins (1998) demonstrate that tourism planning has evolved from relatively simple destination planning toward increasingly complex governance systems involving multiple stakeholders, market regulation, and public administration. Despite these developments, governments continue to exercise considerable influence through legislation. While the tourism literature has devoted substantial attention to sustainability, destination competitiveness, and marketing strategies, considerably less attention has been given to tourism as an instrument of political economy. Existing studies generally examine how governments promote tourism rather than studying national development plans to explore why specific political systems design tourism policies that privilege certain actors over others. Consequently, relatively little is known about how public policy shapes market access for local communities, SMEs, and politically connected organizations within different governance structures.

2.3 Rentier States, State Capitalism, and Tourism Governance

Rentier State Theory argues that governments receiving substantial external revenues become less dependent on domestic taxation and therefore less accountable to society (Ross, 2001). Such states frequently allocate economic opportunities through centralized institutions and politically connected organizations. Iran exemplifies this pattern (Assareh et al., 2010). Although Türkiye does not possess comparable hydrocarbon resources, tourism has become one of its principal sources of foreign exchange and economic growth. Successive governments, particularly under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), have treated tourism as a strategic economic sector. Tourism has simultaneously functioned as an instrument of soft power, contributing to Türkiye's broader foreign policy objectives and international visibility (Balcı & Boztaş, 2021). These contrasting economic structures provide an opportunity to examine whether different revenue

models produce similar governance outcomes. Rather than assuming that oil and tourism generate fundamentally different political dynamics, this study explores whether both sectors may become incorporated into centralized systems of political-economic governance in which governments retain significant influence over market development and resource allocation. It can be a phenomenon called tourism governance through selective market inclusion.

2.4 Local Communities, SMEs, and Tourism Policy

A central objective of tourism policy is to ensure that tourism contributes to local economic development. SMEs are particularly significant because they generate employment (Tosun & Jenkins, 1998). Despite this consensus, previous research suggests that tourism policies often emphasize macroeconomic indicators—including visitor arrivals, foreign exchange earnings, and investment levels—while paying comparatively limited attention to the distribution of tourism benefits among local communities. In many developing and transitional economies, tourism policies continue to prioritize large-scale investment projects and politically influential organizations, leaving SMEs with comparatively limited access to financial resources, institutional support, and tourism markets. Existing research on Iran similarly identifies the absence of coherent tourism policy and institutional coordination as significant barriers to tourism market development (Ranjbar et al., 2021; Veysi, 2017). Although Türkiye has developed considerably more comprehensive tourism strategies, relatively few studies have examined whether these policies produce equitable opportunities for local communities and SMEs. This represents an important gap within tourism governance research.

2.5 Digital Governance and Tourism Market Access

Digital technologies have transformed the global tourism sector by reducing information asymmetries, lowering marketing costs, and enabling direct interaction between tourism providers and consumers. Social media platforms, online booking systems, search engines, and digital marketing have become essential instruments through which tourism SMEs compete in international markets (Veseli et al., 2025). Consequently, internet accessibility and ICT infrastructure now constitute fundamental components of tourism competitiveness rather than merely supporting technologies.

However, digital infrastructure is simultaneously shaped by public policy. Governments regulate internet access, telecommunications, data governance, and digital platforms through legislation that can either facilitate or constrain tourism market participation. In politically restrictive environments, digital regulation may therefore influence tourism development not only through technological capacity but also through political control over information flows and market access.

This dimension has received comparatively little attention within tourism policy literature. Existing studies generally evaluate digital tourism from marketing or technological perspectives while paying less attention to the political institutions governing digital access. Understanding how

internet regulation affects tourism entrepreneurship is therefore particularly relevant for countries where governments maintain extensive oversight of digital communication.

2.6 Historical Context

Although Iran and Türkiye have followed distinct political-economic trajectories, both maintain traditions of centralized state administration that continue to shape national planning. Türkiye has increasingly relied on tourism as a strategic source of growth, whereas Iran's dependence on hydrocarbon revenues has limited tourism's strategic importance. This contrast provides an appropriate setting for examining whether different political-economic systems nevertheless produce similar patterns of tourism governance.

2.7 Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined tourism planning, destination management, public policy, and tourism marketing separately, relatively few have investigated how tourism public policy simultaneously shapes community participation, SME development, digital governance, and state-market relations within authoritarian and hybrid political systems. Existing scholarship has also paid limited attention to the ways national development plans allocate opportunities between local enterprises and state-affiliated organizations. To address these gaps, this study compares tourism public policy in Iran and Türkiye across four analytical dimensions: (1) tourism governance and national development planning; (2) local communities and private-sector participation; (3) the relationship between SMEs and state-supported organizations; and (4) digital governance and ICT support. By integrating tourism governance with political economy and public policy analysis, the study seeks to advance understanding of how tourism functions not only as an economic sector but also as an instrument of political-economic governance.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

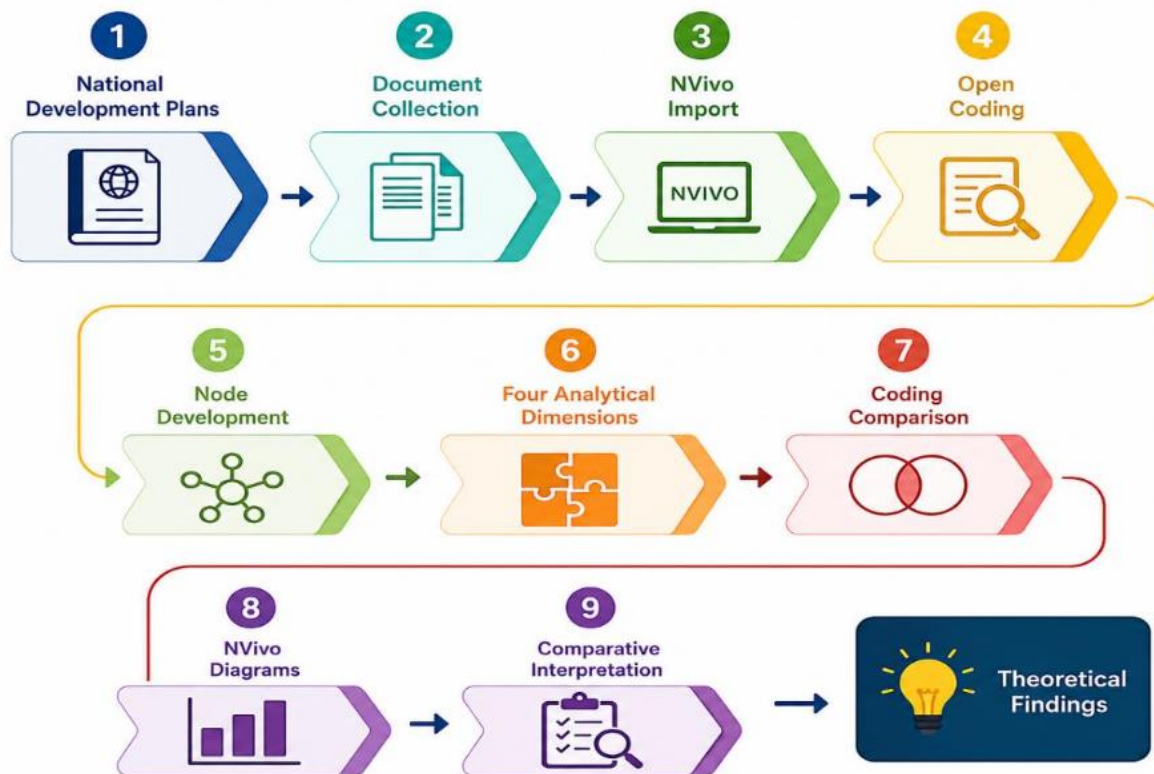
This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design based on archival policy analysis. Rather than treating tourism as an isolated economic sector, the research conceptualizes tourism policy as a mechanism of political-economic governance through which states regulate tourism markets, allocate economic opportunities, and shape the relationship between public institutions, private sector and small-medium enterprises, and local communities as well as select market inclusion. From this perspective, tourism policy extends beyond destination development and functions as part of broader systems of state governance.

The study compares Iran under the Islamic Republic (1979 onwards) and Türkiye under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (2002 onwards). These cases were selected through purposive comparative sampling because they represent contrasting economic structures—a petro-state and a tourism-dependent economy—while sharing important characteristics, including centralized

governance, long-term national development planning, and significant state involvement in economic regulation. This combination provides an appropriate setting for examining whether different economic models produce similar patterns of tourism governance.

Rather than treating tourism as an isolated economic sector, the study conceptualizes tourism policy as a mechanism of political-economic governance through which states regulate tourism markets, allocate economic opportunities, and shape relations among public institutions, the private sector, SMEs, and local communities.

Figure 1. The Methodological Flow Chart



3.2 Archival Policy Analysis

The research employs qualitative archival analysis as its principal methodological approach. Archival research is particularly appropriate because national development plans represent official governmental visions that define long-term policy priorities, institutional responsibilities, and strategic directions. These documents reveal governmental priorities and the governance philosophies underlying tourism development.

The primary data consist of national development plans in both countries. These materials were supplemented by scholarly publications addressing tourism governance, public policy, digital regulation, political economy, private sector, and SME development. International policy frameworks published by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) were also consulted to provide an external reference point for comparison. The analysis does not assume that official policy documents accurately represent policy implementation. Instead, these documents are examined as institutional texts that reveal governmental priorities, policy discourse, and mechanisms through which states seek to organize tourism markets and regulate economic participation.

3.3 Data Collection

Official national development plan documents were collected from publicly accessible governmental repositories. Iranian national development plans were obtained through the Islamic Consultative Assembly Research Center together with publications from relevant ministries. Turkish national development plans and tourism strategies were collected through the Presidency of Strategy and Budget and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The researcher's fluency in English, Farsi, and Turkish enabled direct analysis of original-language documents, reducing reliance on translations. This multilingual capacity reduced potential interpretive bias arising from translation while facilitating close comparison between the two policy systems. Document selection followed three criteria. First, documents had to constitute official national policy or legislation governing tourism, economic development, digital infrastructure, or SME development. Second, they had to fall within the selected periods of analysis: post-1979 Iran and post-2002 Türkiye. Third, documents needed to contain policy provisions directly or indirectly influencing tourism governance, market regulation, community participation, or digital accessibility.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework was developed deductively from the literature on tourism governance, political economy, public policy, and digital governance. Rather than generating themes inductively, the study examined policy documents through four theoretically informed analytical dimensions:

- 1) Tourism governance and national development planning;
- 2) Community participation and private-sector involvement;
- 3) The relationship between SMEs, state-affiliated organizations, and market access;
- 4) Digital governance, ICT infrastructure, and internet accessibility.

Together, these dimensions operationalize the study's central proposition that tourism policy functions as both a development strategy and a mechanism for regulating market access and distributing economic opportunities.

3.5 Qualitative Content Analysis

The documentary materials were analyzed using qualitative content analysis supported by NVivo software. NVivo facilitated systematic coding, comparison, and retrieval of policy content across both cases. Coding remained guided by the study's conceptual framework and critical interpretation rather than by the software itself. Policy documents were imported into NVivo and coded according to the predefined analytical framework. Initial coding focused on explicit references to tourism, SMEs, local communities, digital technologies, ICT infrastructure, public participation, investment, governance, regulation, and institutional responsibility. During iterative reading, additional subthemes were identified where policy texts revealed broader patterns concerning political authority, state intervention, and market regulation. Word-frequency queries (Figure 2) and coding comparisons were subsequently used as supplementary analytical procedures to identify recurring policy priorities and evaluate the relative emphasis assigned to different themes across the two countries. These outputs were not treated as findings in themselves but as supporting evidence for the qualitative interpretation.

Figure 2. Word Frequency Query



3.6 Analytical Interpretation

The analysis adopts an interpretive perspective informed by critical policy analysis. Rather than measuring policy effectiveness directly, it examines how governments like Islamic Republic in Iran and AKP in Türkiye construct tourism governance through official discourse and institutional planning. Particular attention is given to what policies prioritize, what they omit, and how these choices shape opportunities for SMEs, local communities, and private-sector actors.

Accordingly, tourism policy is interpreted as an expression of broader political- economic structures rather than merely administrative decisions. The comparison therefore extends beyond tourism management to examine how policy frameworks regulate access to markets, digital participation, and institutional power. The visualizations generated through NVivo—including coding comparison diagrams and node frequency charts—were used to identify similarities and differences between the two policy systems. These diagrams do not constitute the findings themselves but provide a transparent representation of coding patterns that support the subsequent qualitative interpretation.

Table 1. Analytical Dimension within the Coding Framework

Research Question	NVivo Codes	Figure No.
RQ1	Development Plans	3
RQ2	Local Communities, SMEs	4, 4.1
RQ3	QUANGOs, Top-down Policies	5
RQ4	Digital Governance, ICT	6

Figure 3 (as presented in appendix below) demonstrates that the first of the four interrelated dimensions examined within this study—tourism public policies and national development plans—has been treated as a significant policy area under the AKP in Türkiye. There have been five national development plans implemented during a specific period of time, whereas in Iran under the Islamic Republic there has been no consistent discipline in scheduling national development plans. Türkiye’s national development plans under the AKP, together with its strategic plans such as those related to health tourism, are systematically scheduled, sequential, and interconnected, whereas Iran under the Islamic Republic does not demonstrate the same degree of institutional continuity. The divergence between the AKP and the Islamic Republic—both forms of religious statecraft—lies in the manner through which they attempt to maintain strict control over public affairs.

The second of the four interrelated dimensions examined within this study concerns local communities and the private sector (two items) within national development plans. Figures 4 and 4.1 (as presented in appendix below) illustrate the coded results, indicating that Türkiye under the AKP refers to community participation in tourism more extensively than Iran under the Islamic Republic. In terms of democratic decision-making, the AKP administration in Türkiye appears more advanced than the Islamic Republic; however, both statecrafts—particularly the AKP—

approach this issue primarily as a mechanism for facilitating and attracting investment from local communities and the private sector. The diagrams also reveal that local community employment within Türkiye's tourism public policies is emphasized more strongly than in Iran under the Islamic Republic. This difference may be associated with the distinct interpretations of justice adopted by these two statecrafts.

The third of the four interrelated dimensions examined within this study concerns tourism QUANGOs versus SMEs as spectacles of governmental soft power as well as rentier state tourism. Figure 5 (as presented in appendix below) displays the results for this dimension. The Islamic Republic in Iran and the AKP administration in Türkiye allocate only a limited role to SMEs within tourism development. Even under the most favorable circumstances, facilities and services in Türkiye are primarily directed toward microeconomic actors. It is a deliberate policy orientation within both statecrafts to empower QUANGOs, particularly in the case of the Islamic Republic. Across public policies, policymakers within the Islamic Republic attempt to formulate policies that directly or indirectly pave the way for the expansion and empowerment of QUANGOs. The output presented in the diagram further clarifies that policymakers in Iran, more than their Turkish counterparts, prioritize actors who are positioned closer to the circle of rentier relations. This reflects a highly centralized top-down policy structure in Iran, which appears considerably stronger than that of Türkiye under the AKP. Although Türkiye under the AKP makes some references to financial assistance for tourism SMEs, Iran under the Islamic Republic provides almost none. Similarly, support for SMEs within AKP Türkiye's policies is considerably more visible than in Iran under the Islamic Republic.

The fourth of the four interrelated dimensions examined within this study concerns digital information and communication. Figure 6 (as presented in appendix below) displays the results for this dimension. Tourism policies under the AKP in Türkiye incorporate references to digital and ICT support, whereas Iran's development plans contain virtually none. This limited attention to digital infrastructure and internet accessibility in Iran underscores the minimal role assigned to technology in supporting local tourism enterprises. The convergence between the two statecrafts lies in their restrictive approach toward digital governance. In Iran, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, the ICT Ministry, and the IRGC impose extensive restrictions on internet usage, affecting not only tourism SMEs but also broader sectors and local communities. In Türkiye, AKP policies permit extensive state monitoring of the internet, while simultaneously portraying internet addiction as a persistent risk factor for children and young people, comparable to threats such as sexual exploitation against children. AKP discourse further suggests that the internet may weaken social solidarity. Both AKP Türkiye's tourism-related internet policies and the Islamic Republic's broader internet policies demonstrate limited attention to digital infrastructure development. Consequently, both statecrafts assign only a minimal role to technology in supporting local tourism enterprises within their respective countries.

Table 2. Codes Compared by Number of Coding References

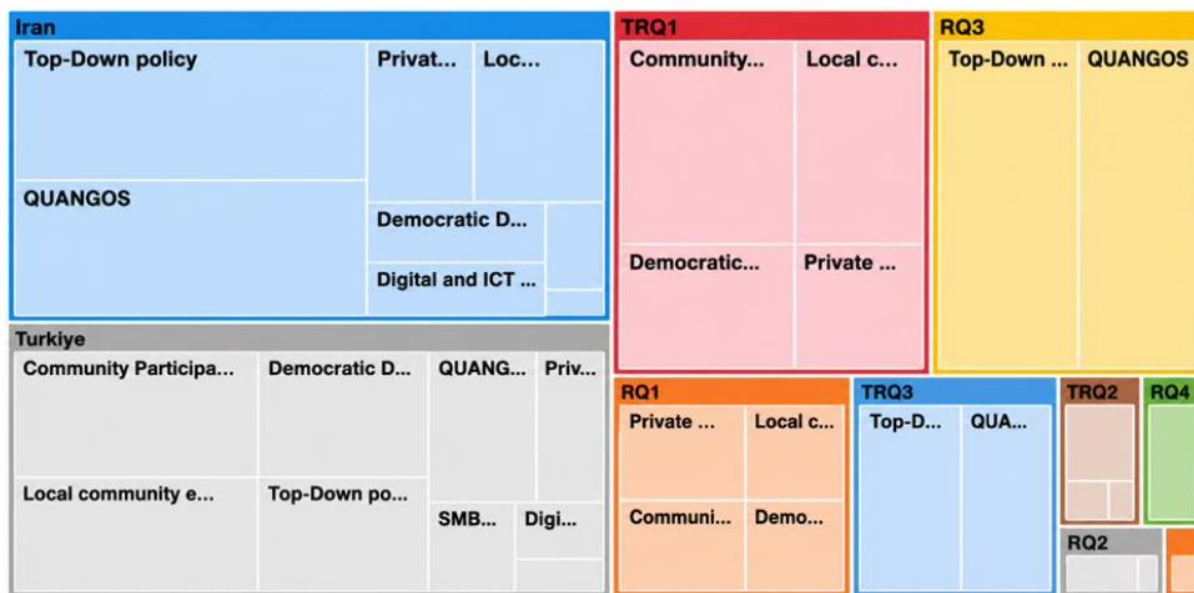


Table 2 verifies that public policy—whether in tourism or other sectors—in Iran under the Islamic Republic, particularly since 1988, has predominantly followed a top-down model. Every public policy and national development plan has been required to conform to the Islamic Republic’s Twenty-Year Vision Plan, also known as the Vision of the Islamic Republic, prepared by the Expediency Discernment Council under the direction of Ali Khamenei. The table demonstrates that sectors addressed within national development plans, including the internet and ICT infrastructures required for a free society, must be approved by institutions such as the Supreme Council of Cyberspace and the National Center of Cyberspace, whose members are appointed by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. ICT and internet providers and regulators are expected to respect and implement the Supreme Leader’s directives; for this reason, they are described as governmental executive branches rather than merely state-affiliated institutions. In practice, these companies function as QUANGOs and rentier enterprises operating within the framework of religious statecraft. One of the rentier tourism companies in Iran under Islamic Republic is Iran and World Tourism Development Cooperation (IWTDC) that used to be the establishment of the Tourism Facilities Company for improving the management and operation of tourism infrastructure in a manner that would ensure profitability and minimize financial losses. Following the 1979 Revolution, this company was transformed in 2002 into one of the rentier tourism quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations (QUANGOs) under the name of IWTDC.

A similar pattern is evident in Türkiye under the AKP, although to a lesser extent. The table demonstrates that AKP development plans consider legal amendments affecting priority sectors

and meeting specific criteria to be publicly shared through an integrated e-government internet portal, while also envisaging transition periods for the implementation of legislation where possible. The convergence between the AKP in Türkiye and the Islamic Republic in Iran is manifested through a subtle divergence. In Iran under the Islamic Republic, top-down public policy functions in a direct manner whereby the leader issues directives and subordinate actors—including rentier companies and QUANGOs—implement them. In contrast, under the AKP in Türkiye, the state first identifies an issue requiring legal amendment and subsequently institutionalizes the desired policy outcome through legislative mechanisms.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Research Quality

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. First, multiple categories of official documents were examined rather than relying on a single policy source. Second, policy documents from two countries were analyzed using the same analytical framework, allowing systematic comparison. Third, the use of original-language materials minimized interpretive distortions associated with translation. Finally, NVivo provided a transparent audit trail that supported consistent comparison across documents.

The objective of the study is not to claim causal relationships between policy and tourism outcomes but to provide an analytically grounded interpretation of how tourism governance is conceptualized within official policy frameworks and how these frameworks structure the relationship between the state, tourism markets, and local economic actors.

Following the importation of the policy documents into NVivo, an initial coding framework was developed deductively from the literature and the study's research questions. Individual references within the national development plans were coded into thematic nodes representing tourism governance, local community participation, SMEs, QUANGOs, digital governance, ICT support, public participation, and state regulation. These first-order codes were subsequently grouped into four broader analytical dimensions corresponding to the research questions. NVivo's coding comparison matrices, coding frequency reports, and visualization tools were then used to examine the relative emphasis placed on these themes across the Iranian and Turkish policy documents. The resulting figures (appendix below) illustrate comparative patterns of policy attention rather than statistical relationships and served as analytical devices supporting the qualitative interpretation.

4. Findings and Analysis

Building on the documentary analysis, the findings are interpreted through the perspectives of tourism governance and political economy. Rather than viewing tourism policy solely as a mechanism for destination development, the analysis examines how policy frameworks shape market access, digital participation, institutional authority, and the distribution of opportunities between state-affiliated organizations and local actors.

The findings indicate that tourism policy in both Iran under the Islamic Republic and Türkiye under the AKP extends beyond conventional tourism management. Rather than promoting community empowerment or decentralized economic development, policy functions as an instrument of political-economic governance, embedding tourism within centralized statecraft that prioritizes state objectives, institutional interests, image management, and political control.

The policy documents further suggest that religion serves as an important source of legitimacy for these centralized governance structures. Coding analysis shows that both governments emphasize tourist arrivals while providing limited explanation of how tourism revenues and market opportunities benefit local communities, SMEs, or independent private-sector actors. Although Türkiye formally promotes private-sector investment, its policy documents rarely specify how market opportunities are distributed. In both countries, access to tourism markets remains uneven, with policy frameworks favoring state-centered economic networks, including QUANGOs, politically connected enterprises, and large-scale investors. The comparative analysis also indicates that both governments conceptualize tourism as an instrument of soft power. In Iran, tourism is incorporated into an ideological framework that reinforces revolutionary identity and religious legitimacy. In Türkiye, the AKP employs tourism to strengthen geopolitical influence and international visibility, particularly in Africa and the wider MENA region through initiatives such as the Tolunoğulları–Africa project. Across successive development plans, tourism is therefore presented less as a vehicle for equitable development than as an instrument of image construction, foreign policy, and state legitimacy. Although the AKP formally encourages citizen participation, major policy decisions continue to be formulated within centralized institutions. Digital governance represents another important dimension of tourism market development. Internet accessibility and ICT infrastructure have become essential for participation in international tourism markets, yet in both countries digital governance combines economic modernization with political oversight. In Iran, internet filtering, platform restrictions, and periodic shutdowns constrain SMEs and local communities by limiting access to international markets and digital visibility.

Türkiye has developed more advanced digital infrastructure, but internet governance remains closely associated with surveillance-oriented regulation. In both cases, digital policy shapes not only technological capacity but also market participation. The comparison reveals both convergence and divergence. Türkiye demonstrates a stronger institutional commitment to tourism because of its greater dependence on tourism revenues, yet its policies continue to provide limited support for SMEs and community-based enterprises. Iran, by contrast, remains constrained by the lower strategic priority assigned to tourism within a hydrocarbon-dependent economy. Despite these differences, both countries exhibit centralized policy frameworks in which governments retain significant influence over market participation, digital access, and the allocation of tourism opportunities. These findings support the argument that tourism policy in authoritarian and hybrid

political systems functions not only as a development strategy but also as a mechanism of political-economic governance through which states regulate markets and structure economic opportunity.

5. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study has examined tourism public policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) through the perspectives of tourism governance, political economy, and public policy analysis. Although the two countries differ substantially in their economic structures, levels of tourism dependence, and institutional development, the comparative analysis reveals important similarities in how tourism is incorporated into centralized systems of governance. The findings demonstrate that tourism policy extends beyond its conventional role as an instrument of economic development. Rather than focusing exclusively on destination competitiveness, visitor growth, or investment promotion, tourism policy also shapes market access, institutional authority, digital participation, and the distribution of economic opportunities among state institutions, quasi-governmental organizations, private enterprises, and local communities. Tourism policy should therefore be understood not only as a development strategy but also as a mechanism of political-economic governance. Across the policy documents analyzed, limited attention is devoted to strengthening SMEs, supporting community-based tourism enterprises, or establishing transparent mechanisms through which local actors can participate equitably in tourism markets. Instead, tourism development is primarily framed within broader objectives of economic modernization, investment attraction, institutional coordination, and international image-building. Although Türkiye demonstrates stronger institutional continuity and greater policy commitment to tourism than Iran, both cases reveal centralized governance in which state institutions retain considerable influence over the allocation of tourism opportunities.

The analysis also highlights the importance of digital governance. Although digital technologies have become essential for tourism entrepreneurship and international market participation, digital infrastructure remains embedded within broader systems of public regulation and institutional oversight. Consequently, digital accessibility is not merely a technological issue but a central dimension of tourism governance influencing SMEs' and local communities' participation in tourism markets.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the tourism policy literature by conceptualizing tourism policy as a mechanism of selective market inclusion. Rather than distributing opportunities uniformly, public policy shapes which actors gain access to investment, institutional support, digital infrastructure, and tourism markets. This perspective extends tourism governance scholarship by linking tourism policy to broader debates on political economy, state-market relations, and public administration. The study also carries important policy implications. While international organizations such as UN Tourism emphasize sustainable development, local welfare, and community participation, the comparative evidence suggests that these objectives require more explicit policy mechanisms that strengthen SMEs, local entrepreneurship, and

equitable market access. Like all qualitative comparative studies, this research has limitations. It relies primarily on official policy documents, national development plans, archival materials, quantitative economic evidence, and ethnographic field observations. Although these sources provide valuable insight into governmental priorities and institutional discourse, they cannot fully capture policy implementation or the lived experiences of local communities and tourism entrepreneurs.

Future research could extend this analysis to additional Middle Eastern and North African countries, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, where tourism expansion, centralized governance, and digital regulation increasingly intersect. Comparative studies between democratic and authoritarian systems would further clarify how political institutions shape market access, SME participation, and community empowerment. Future research should also examine how digital platforms, algorithmic visibility, and internet regulation influence tourism entrepreneurship in politically restrictive environments. Interview-based research involving policymakers, tourism entrepreneurs, community representatives, and civil society organizations would complement document analysis by examining policy implementation in practice. Ultimately, this study argues that tourism policy is not simply a framework for promoting destinations but a mechanism through which states organize market participation, regulate digital access, and distribute economic opportunities. Viewing tourism through this political economy perspective provides a more comprehensive explanation of how political institutions shape tourism development and offers a foundation for future research at the intersection of tourism studies, public policy, and political economy.

Notes:

1. Turkish national development plans are accessible online in both English and Turkish through The Presidency of Strategy and Budget of the Republic of Türkiye.

<https://www.sbb.gov.tr/kalkinma-planlari>

2. Iranian national development plans under Islamic Republic are accessible online through Islamic Consultative Assembly Research Center of Iran. <https://rc.majlis.ir/>

Declaration of Conflicting Interests:

The author declares that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to this study.

References

- Asadi, R. (2011). Strategies for development of Iran cultural tourism. *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 5(8), 1021-1034.
- Asgary, A., & Ozdemir, A. I. (2020). Global risks and tourism industry in Turkey: A. Asgary, ÖA İhsan. *Quality & Quantity*, 54(5), 1513-1536.
- Aslaksen, S., & Torvik, R. (2006). A theory of civil conflict and democracy in rentier states. *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 108(4), 571-585.
- Assareh, E., Behrang, M. A., Assari, M. R., & Ghanbarzadeh, A. (2010). Application of PSO (particle swarm optimization) and GA (genetic algorithm) techniques on demand estimation of oil in Iran. *Energy*, 35(12), 5223-5229.
- Aykin, S. M., & Yildiz, S. (2012). European Tourism Policy and Reflections of Tourism in the Negotiations with Turkey. *tourismos*, 7(1), 383-395..
- Balci, E., & Boztaş, A. (2021). Tourism as a soft power in Turkish foreign policy from the perspective of women ambassadors: The case of Africa. *Journal of Tourism & Gastronomy Studies*, 9(3), 1482-1500.
- Fayos-Solà, E., & Bueno, A. P. (2005). Globalization, national tourism policy and international organizations. In *Tourism in the age of globalisation* (pp. 59-80). Routledge.
- Ganiyeva, A. B., & Tanriverdiyev, M. S. The State Support to the Tourism Policy Formation Mechanism in Black Sea Basin Countries (Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Georgia) and Its Impact on Sustainable Tourism Development. *environment*, 9, 14.
- Girard, M., Polo, J. F., & Scalbert-Yücel, C. (Eds.). (2018). *Turkish cultural policies in a global world* (p.127). Basingstoke and New York: palgrave macmillan.
- Hall, C. M. (2008). *Tourism planning: Policies, processes and relationships*. Pearson education.
- Ikiz, A. S. (Ed.). (2021). *Tourism in Turkey: A Comprehensive Overview and Analysis for Sustainable Alternative Tourism*.
- Karoubi, M., Yavari Gohar, F., Mahmoudzadeh, S. M., & Mohammadian Mahmoudjigh, N. (2021). Analyzing tourism nation branding and tourism brand management of Iran in the large-scale and basic policies of Islamic Republic of Iran. *Tourism Management Studies*, 16(56), 45-82.
- Kavaratzis, M., & Ashworth, G. J. (2007). Partners in coffeeshops, canals and commerce: Marketing the city of Amsterdam. *Cities*, 24(1), 16-25.
- Kulaç, O., Akman, E., & Babaoğlu, C. (Eds.). (2019). *Public Policy Analysis in Turkey: Past, Present and Future*. Peter Lang.

- Luleci-Sula, C. (2020). Domestic threats and foreign policy agenda: a security perspective on Turkey's Iran policy. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 47(5), 723-740.
- Mengü, C. (2018). Approaches on the future of Turkey tourism in 2023. *European Journal of Educational and Social Sciences*, 3(2), 164-184.
- Netto, A. P. (2009). What is tourism? Definitions, theoretical phases and principles. *Philosophical issues in tourism*, 37, 43-62.
- Ozcurumez, S., & Yetkin, D. (2014). Limits to regulating irregular migration in Turkey: What constrains public policy and why?. *Turkish Studies*, 15(3), 442-457.
- Oztig, L. I., Ozturk, A. E., & Adisonmez, U. C. (2025). Faith and force: imposition, dissemination, and transnationalization of religion in Türkiye and Iran. *Policy Studies*, 1-22.
- Ozturk, A. B., & Van Niekerk, M. (2014). Volume or value: A policy decision for Turkey 's tourism industry. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 3(4), 193-197.
- Ranjbar Motalegh, F., Vaezi, R., Ziaee, M., & Hoseinpour, D. (2021). Tourism Issues on Iran's Public Policy Agenda. *Tourism Management Studies*, 16(55), 11-40.
- Ross, M. L. (2001). Does oil hinder democracy?. *World politics*, 53(3), 325-361.
- Veysi, H. (2017). Review of tourism industry policy in the upstream laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Quarterly Journal of Strategic Public Policy Studies*, 7(25), Winter, 123-145.
- Ward, E. R. (2006). Delayed Gratification: The Evolution of Turkish Tourism Policy, 1955-2005. *Insight Turkey*, 156-167.
- Yılmaz, F. K., Capar, H., & Şeker, C. (2021). Process Analysis of a Public Policy in Turkey: Medical Tourism. *Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi Vizyoner Dergisi*, 12(30), 417-433.

Figure 3. National Development Plans

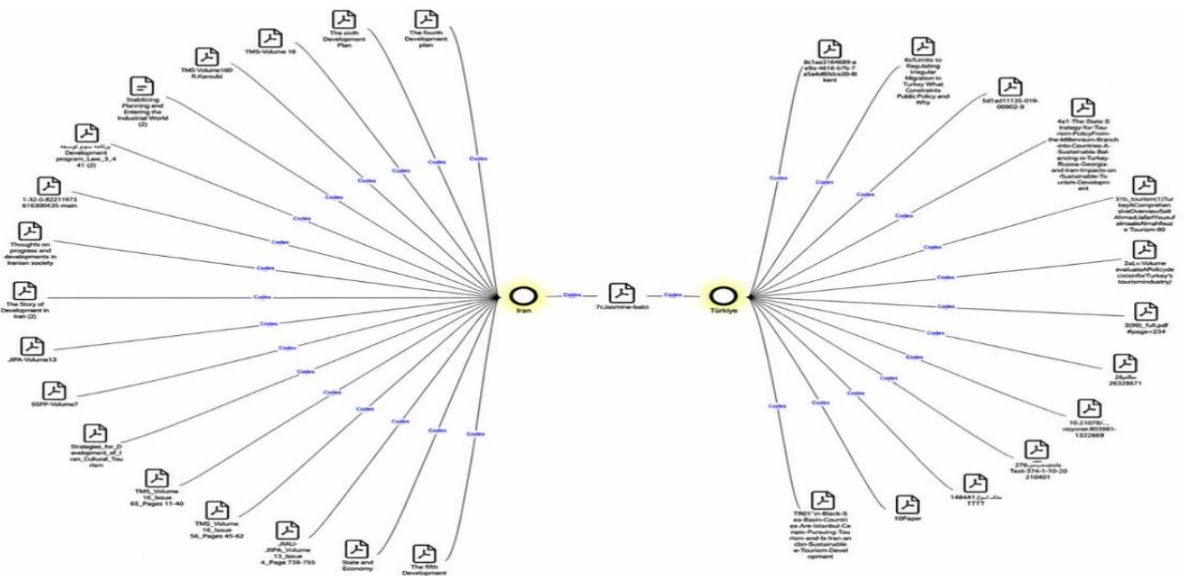
[illegible]

Figure 4.1 SMEs

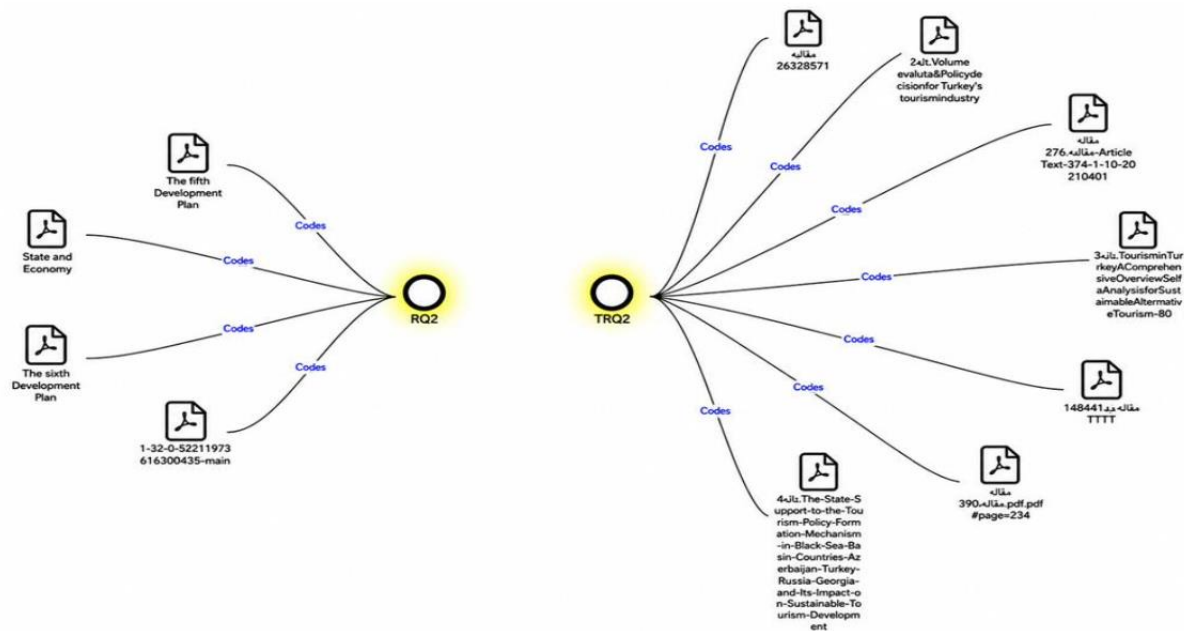


Figure 5. QUANGOs and Top-down Policies

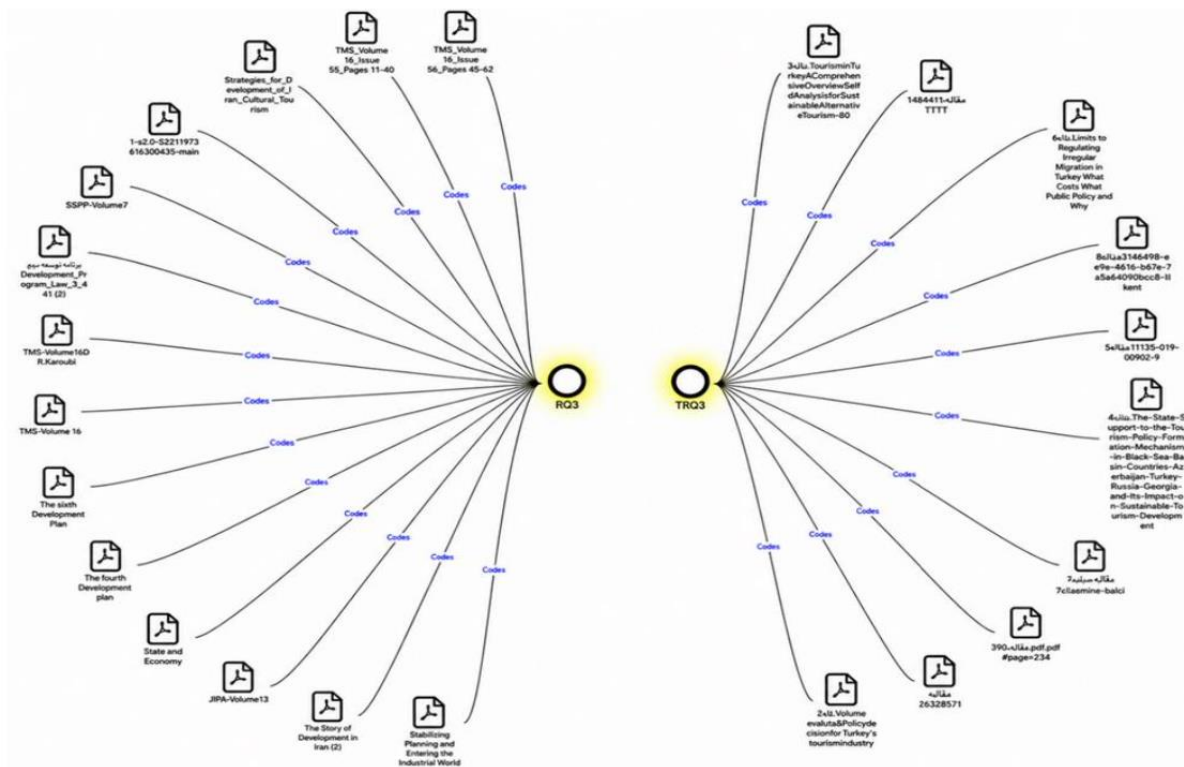


Figure 6. Digital Governance and ICT Support

