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Mehdi Ebadi
ebadiran@gmail.com

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Shrine Pilgrimage (Ziyārat) in Turco-Iranian Cultural Regions

Mehdi Ebadi
Persika Tours
Gerolstein, Germany
ebadiran@gmail.com

Academic studies, dedicated to various aspects of religiously motivated travel have increased steadily, especially in recent years. Despite the huge amount of publications related to tourism and religious pilgrimage, there is still a gap between abstract theory and empirical research. Studies devoted to pilgrimage in the developing countries generally, and Islamic regions in particular are rather few in number in spite of its socio-economic importance and widespread practices. The present work tries to address this relative lack of attention and will shed more light on the tradition of shrine pilgrimage (known as ziyārat) in Turco-Iranian cultural milieu that is almost unknown within the wider community of tourism and geography researchers.

Key Words: Religious tourism, Shrine Pilgrimage, Ziyārat, Iran, Central Asia, Turco-Iranian cultures, Turkmen Sahra

Introduction

Tourism is considered to be an activity which, in one form or another, mankind has been engaged in from times immemorial. In the last decade the number of international tourists grew almost exponentially until it reached a historical record of more than one billion in 2012. One of the most important, but rather neglected forms of tourism is religiously motivated travel, also known as ‘religious tourism’ or ‘pilgrimage’. Since the dawn of history, vast numbers of sacred places around the world such as shrines, temples, churches, religious festivals, landscape features, and so on, have attracted pilgrims. Even in our highly mobile and largely secularized modern world, pilgrimage is still a force to be reckoned with. With around 200 to 600 million national and international religious and spiritual journeys taking place every year, pilgrimage is clearly one of the fastest growing forms of tourism (UNWTO, 2011; Rinschede & Bhardwaj, 1988). Numerous cities worldwide have been built and developed thanks to pilgrimage. Among the most well-known examples are Lourdes in France, Mecca in Saudi Arabia, Karbala in Iraq and Mashhad in Iran, whose economies are largely reliant on the huge numbers of pilgrims. In recent years, academic studies, dedicated to various aspects of religiously motivated travel have increased steadily. But there is still a gap between abstract theory and empirical research. Studies devoted to pilgrimage in developing countries generally, and Islamic regions in particular are rather few. Among the areas where Islamic shrine pilgrimage is strongly popular and practiced is the so-called Turco-Iranian cultural region.

Literature Review

Pilgrimage, or religious motivated travel, plays a great role in the social life of Muslims and is an important part of Islamic fabric. From North Africa, the Middle East to Central, and South / Southeast Asia, shrine pilgrimage is common among Muslims. Numerous Sufi lodgings (khaneqahs), shrines, schools, mosques, tombs (mazars), and mausoleums of saints, martyrs, Sufi-masters, and other holy men and women, attract millions of pilgrims, who travel substantial distances to these centers (Barnfoot and Barnesm, 2006; Schimmel, 1980; Din, 1989; Lanquar, 2001 and Van Bruinsessen, 2008). According to Islamic traditions, Muslims are encouraged to travel, not only to bear witness to the greatness of God, but also to gain knowledge, learn about other cultures, and meet pious and wise men. Generally, the ‘religious’ travels among Muslims around the world could be classified into two forms: Mandatory (Hajj) and voluntary (ziyārat). Hajj or pilgrimage to the Ka’ba (‘the house of God’) in Mecca is the most important travel event for Muslims. Each year from the 8th to the 12th day of Dhu al-Hijjah (the last month of the Arabic/Islamic calendar), more than two million pilgrims from every corner of the world come to perform the ritual of Hajj. This pilgrimage to Mecca serves as the model for other forms of
Ziyārat (ziyara) derived from the Arabic word zara which literary means ‘to visit’.  

3. Sufism as a ‘popular’ version of Islam; originated in reaction to over-legalistic formulations of Islam and for several centuries, represented a powerful alternative source of power. In Sufism, developing a power inner position that it, along with Profession of faith, fasting during the month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and ritual prayer is considered to be as one of the ‘five pillars’ of Islam. 

1. Moreover, the Hajj to Mecca occupies such a central position that it, along with Profession of faith, fasting during the month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and ritual prayer is considered to be as one of the ‘five pillars’ of Islam. 

2. Ziyārat (ziyara) derived from the Arabic word zara which literary means ‘to visit’.  

4. Prager reports on shrine pilgrimage (ziyārat) among Alawis in Turkey. She notes: ‘one of the key concepts of the Alawi religion is the idea of a cyclical manifestation of God’s revelation, resulting from the fall of the Light Souls (nurant) beginning with Adam and finding its closure with ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. These cyclical revelations were closely connected to teachings about the reincarnation and transmigration of souls, the latter being essential for the understanding of Alawi ideas and practices surrounding the ziyāra. [...] the Alawi differentiate between three types of ziyārāt, namely, the khidr-ziyārāt, nabi-ziyārāt, and shaykh-ziyārāt. While the first two categories are related to the idea of reincarnation of Lights Souls, the shaykh-ziyārāt are usually connected with the transmigration of souls, particularly those of gifted/spiritually advanced human beings. Each of these ziyārāt is named after the respective Prophet, saint or shaykh to whom the shrine is dedicated (Prager, 2013:45-48). 

The importance of ziyārat in some Muslim cultures (especially Sufi cults), extends to a level whereby it is seen to be as important as Hajj for many believers. Privratsky (2001) for instance remarks about the importance of pilgrimage to the shrine of Ahmet Yasawi (a popular Sufi Saint) among Kazakhs. Performing pilgrimage to his shrine (which they call ekinski Mecca which literary means ‘second Mecca’) three times, is equivalent to a single pilgrimage to Mecca. Montgomery (2007: 362-370), who examined the holy mountain in Osh in Kyrgyzstan, similarly reports on the religious rituals and traditions of ziyārat among local visitors who believe that it is only after visiting this Mountain that an individual can be prepared to go to Mecca. They also believe that performing three (to ten) visits to Sulayman Mountain is equivalent to a Hajj to Mecca. Other researchers like

Ziyārat [Sic.] seem to be composed of subsystems that have developed in several cultural contexts, each of which shares the universal characteristics of Islam, but also reflects [the regional] cultural distinctiveness. . . contrary to Hajj, the behavior of the individuals in the ziarat, reflects the cultural context and the individual’s existential quest . . . there are no uniformity prescribed rules. . . the individual pilgrim in the ziarat follows the rules specific to the place and local culture . . . it is not uncommon to see pilgrims in ziarat singing devotional songs, expressing their frailty, or asking for the intercession of local saint in personal problems (Bhardwaj, 1998: 72-79).
Daneshvari (1986), Hällzon (2009), Lymer (2004), and Prager (2013)[4] have also reported about such perceptions in other parts of the Islamic world as well.

Despite the motivations among many Muslims to do ziyārat, pilgrimage to sacred places other than Mecca is a controversial subject in Islamic orthodox contexts, since these practices are not supported by the Quran or hadiths (Timothy and Iverson, 2006; Abramson and Karimov, 2007).

In spite of the fact that in the early Islamic evidence, unlike other religions like Christianity,[5] there was no evidence of sanctification; nevertheless, nowadays saint-related pilgrimage is a common activity among a large number of Muslims[6]. Soucek in this regards indicates:

[Although] there was no canonization process . . . Muslim saints were admitted - or believed by the masses - to perform karamat, a concept half-way between miracle and blessing bestowed by God; and in the absence of a canonical counterpart to the Christian saint, there were words like wali (Arabic for wali Allah, ‘he who is close to God’), khwaja, ishon, bābā, atā, or Owliyā (plural of wali often used in Turkic as a singular) which assumed that function. In their lifetime, these saints played . . . catalytic roles in spreading or affirming Islam in all directions; these roles acquired a new and special lease of life after the saints’ deaths, when their tombs became the centers of shrines or mazars (Soucek, 2000: 38).

Historically speaking, Iran and Central Asia have numerous cultural connections so that nowadays one can observe several similar religious and cultural rituals among the people of Iran and Central Asia. Richard Frye, an American professor of Iranian and Central Asian studies about this matter comments:

[…] the peoples of Central Asia, whether Iranian or Turkic speaking, have one culture, one religion, one set of social values and traditions with only language separating them (Frye, 1996: 4).

According to historical documents, a large portion of modern Central Asia (which in ancient times was known as Khorasmia, Sogdiana and part of Khurasan) and Iran were part of a wider cultural milieu, namely the Turco-Persian sphere. In ancient times and before Islam was introduced, this cultural sphere was a bridge between East and West and the confluence of several civilizations stemming from China, India, and the Middle East. Along the so-called Silk Road, Parthian and Persian traders from the Parthian and Sassanian Empires of the Middle East became prominent as early as 247 BCE (Foltz, 2010). These communities were instrumental in the exchange, not only of material goods, but also of ideas and several religious traditions flowing between East and West. After the fifth century, a confederation of Turkic tribes from around the eastern Altai Mountains moved westward and a century later replaced Iranian speaking groups who had migrated to Iran and India. From 552 to 654, these groups of Turks together with the Sasanian Empire controlled Central Asia (Frye, 1984 and Levi, 2007).

The introduction of Islam accelerated the Persianisation of the Iranian speaking communities; subsequently the Arabicized version of Persian became the lingua franca among other ethnicities, predominantly the former Turkic and Indian language speakers throughout Central Asia. This has given rise to the so-called “Turco-Persian” culture, a blend of indigenous, largely Turkic customs and beliefs as well as cosmopolitan, Islamicized Persian tradition and Arabic language (Mazzaoui, 2011).[7] Canfield (2002: 12) discusses the religious similarities in a general sense:

this composite culture was the beginning of the Turko-Persian variant of Islamic culture [in which] Islam was thereafter disengaged from

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5. Soucek (2000: 38) indicates:

The concept of the canonical ‘saint’ is absent in orthodox Islam, and is only obliquely admitted by its heterodox denominations; thus, none of the three core Islamic languages, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, has a lexical counterpart to the Christian [word] ‘saint’.

In a similar discussion, Coleman and Elsner (1995:69) note:

Unlike the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, the divine attributes of God are held to be remote from human nature, so that according to orthodox teaching no person can be closer to God than any other. Mecca and Medina are, ideally, revered not as cosmopolitan, Islamicized Persian culture [in ancient times and before the introduction of Islam], but also of ideas and several religious traditions flowing between East and West. After the fifth century, a confederation of Turkic tribes from around the eastern Altai Mountains moved westward and a century later replaced Iranian speaking groups who had migrated to Iran and India. From 552 to 654, these groups of Turks together with the Sasanian Empire controlled Central Asia (Frye, 1984 and Levi, 2007).

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the Arab background and Bedouin mores from which it had sprung, to a far richer, more adaptable, and universal culture.

Frye (1996: 231) describes the history of religion in Central Asia as follows:

[…] At the turn of the millennium [11th Century] Central Asia not only was an important Islamic land, but also became the Turkish center of rule, from which Muslim Turks spread to the Balkans and to Delhi […] it was Arabs who brought Iran and Central Asia together, the Turks were the principal agents for spreading what we have called the Iranian (‘Persian’) version of Islamic culture to the west, even to Constantinople […] The Samanids were the last Iranian dynasty to rule in Central Asia, and the year 1000 marks the end of the Samanid dynasty.

The veneration of holy shrines was most likely introduced by these Persian oriented Turkic tribes across the whole Islamic realm.

**Shrine Pilgrimage (ziyārat) in Central Asia**

From ancient times, Central Asia has been home to various faiths such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity and Islam, as well as local cults and beliefs, such as divination and worship of natural forces and objects. The influences of the pre-Islamic Central Asian beliefs on the Islamic tenets are strong. It was only a natural development to combine Islam – as a new faith – with old Shamanistic rituals among early Central Asian Muslims. Accordingly, the roots of many of the rituals in modern times can be traced back to ancient times.

Among the most popular religious and cultural traditions in Central Asia is the veneration of saints (avliyā) and the visits (ziyārat) to their shrines (mazār), which is widely practiced in both rural and urban areas (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2006).

Abramson and Karimov (2007: 325), who have extensively researched pilgrimages in Central Asia, comment:

At several […] sites there is evidence of objects that have roots in pre-Islamic animalistic traditions, mixed in with more traditional Islamic objects. […] In the mazar of Sayid Ibn Abu Vakkos-ota (Sa’as Ibn Malik az-Zuhri) in Shahrisabz Rayon, Kashkadarya Viloyat, a mountain goat horn lies under a carpet that was draped over the tomb.[8]

In the same vein, Montgomery, in his work on religion in the everyday life of Central Asia, reports as following:

As Islam spread, the populations of the region took on Islam at the expense of earlier
religions, but not necessarily excluding them completely - many practices associated with earlier faiths, were retained as ‘traditional’ and understood as compatible with Islam (Montgomery, 2007: 356).

Other researchers also indicate the variety of pre-Islamic beliefs, elements, figures, and practices in Central Asia (Bhardwaj, 1998; Dawut, 2009; Harris and Dawut, 2002). In addition, there are also several reports about the fusion of Islamic and pre-Islamic tradition, and ideas like animism, magic, the role of the cult of ancestors, and saints in shrine worship traditions (Lapidus, 1988; Kandiyoti and Azimova, 2004 and Utas, 1999).

In the modern era, the frequent political upheavals in Central Asia have also impacted on pilgrimage. DeWeese (1988: 45-83) commenting on pilgrimage in post-Soviet Central Asia notes:

[In the modern era], after many decades of life under Soviet socialism, Islamic rituals, such as pilgrimages to sacred sites, are gaining popularity . . . they also have new, contemporary meanings for the region’s Muslims, who are struggling to make sense out of the remarkable social, economic and political changes affecting their lives.

Other researchers have also mentioned that the key role of ziyārat or mazar pilgrimage and the beliefs underlying it are a part of local and even national identity in the everyday spiritual life of Muslims, especially in post-soviet Central Asian countries, up to the present day (DeWeese, 1994; Janzen and Taraschewski, 2009; Abramson and Karimov, 2007; Van Bruinessen, 2008).

In most of the visits to shrines, the purpose of ziyārat among the visitors is to seek the mediation of the saint, based upon a belief in his baraka or savab (God's grace), asking for spiritual guidance, or fulfillment of a vow which could assist with various problems of daily life (like personal health).[9] Indeed, these practices are undoubtedly ancient and pre-Islamic and they were shared by the numerous tribal or religiously-defined groups that spread throughout this large region. These religious rituals are based on a belief in the miraculous power of saints and holy men (known as walish) (Abramson and Karimov, 2007; Eickelman, 1976; Goldziher, 1971; Harris and Dawut, 2002).

The German orientalist Annemarie Schimmel, similarly notes the role and nature of baraka(t) in shrine pilgrimage in Islamic cultures as follows:

the inherited baraka, the blessing power that surrounded a sheikh [pir and master], made people [followers] flock around his dargah [lit. entering door] (Schimmel, 1980: 138).

Shrine Pilgrimage (Ziyārat) in Iran

In Iran, ziyārat includes the visits of believers to sacred sites (ziyāratgah in Persian), which can be natural features (such as springs, trees, stones, etc.) or buildings related to Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish, or Islamic beliefs. Places frequented by Muslim pilgrims can be Saqqā-khāneh,[10] Khaneqāh (a Sufi lodging), or religious schools (madrase). Special kinds of holy places are imāmzādeh (also spelled as emamzada or emamzadeh), which were originally dedicated to a descendent of a Shi’ite Imām.[11] They can also be connected to the companions and the family of the Prophet Muhammad and other venerated figures in mystical Islam or spiritual leaders. It is estimated that there are about 10,000 - 12,000 imāmzādehs and holy shrines in the country, of which less than 4000 are officially registered. Each year, it is estimated that more than 50 millions travellers visit these holy shrines (Ayaz, 2012; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2011; DW, 2012; CHTN, 2013).

Iranian pilgrims (za’er in Persian/Arabic) regularly visit shrines to receive some of the spiritual power (barakat). They expect that making such a pilgrimage will bring them a religious reward (or savāb). It has

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8. They later note:

[...] local mountain goat horns are believed to protect sacred places and the people who make pilgrimages to them, from misfortune and evil (Abramson & Karimov, 2007: 325).

9. Sidky (1990) who researched zeyarat tradition in Afghanistan reports:

when a famous ascetic dies, his grave may become a ziarat, or shrine, believed to be endowed with mystical potency, as were the ancient cult-centres of the past. Frequently such shrines become centers of pilgrimage (Sidky, 1990: 285).

10. A saqqā khanēh (Saqqā-Kana) is often a niche in the wall [especially in the Basars] that provides water for travelers and passers-by. It has a stong symbolic function according to Shi’a Islam. In certain Saqqā khanēhs, some believers light candles, tie rags to the windows, and make wishes (Encyclopedia Iranica). Similar to Imāmzādeh, Saqqā khanēhs are part of the Iranian urban landscape.

11. An Imām according to the Shi’as plays a crucial role as a major leader, in the whole Muslim’s community (Umma). In the eyes of the Shia believers, only the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad can assume this role. The title of Imām given to Khomeini is an honorary epithet.
been suggested that ziyārat in Iran has antique pre-Islamic roots (Hällzon, 2009; Torab, 1996, 2002, 2007). Frye (1975: 140) refers to the influence of Zoroastrianism (the dominant religion before Islam in Iran) on the tradition of ziyārat:

[Although] Zoroastrians did not have grave-shrines, since the bodies were exposed to vultures and not put in the earth . . . the Zoroastrians of Iran did have shrines to various angels or deities (yazatas) [like Anahita] and it was relatively easy to convert some of these to [use by] Muslims, or more especially Shi’ite Imāms. The name pir (lit. old man) or saint was applied to these shrines by Zoroastrians, possibly to protect them from Muslim desecration, and this only made easier the transfer from Zoroastrian to a Muslim shrine.

As an example, Frye (1975) cites the transformation of the originally Zoroastrian shrine of Bibi shahrbanu (near Tehran) to a famous Muslim shrine with the help of a story that suggest that the daughter of that last king of pre-Islamic Iran (Yazdgard III) was betrothed to Husain (the third Imām or spiritual leader in Shi’ism).

Mayhew (2010), a professional British travel writer, who has written several travel guides books for the Lonely Planet series, has recently illustrated the function of the Iranian shrines in a TV documentary project called Marco Polo Reloaded, 2010:

There are thousands of shrines or imāmzādeh in Iran. In their very existence popular belief, pre-Islamic pilgrimage tradition, and the formal, clerical side of Islam intermingle [with each other]. Some of these shrines such as the shrine of the Shah Abol Azim in southern Tehran constitute huge and splendid complexes of buildings. Others are small, of only local significance and with [nothing more than] a kiosk, laundry, cooking, and simple accommodation facilities for the pilgrims attached to it. However, virtually, all imāmzadehs in Iran are furnished with carpets to allow for overnight stays. Being on the road in Iran, one again and again passes by such shrines, many of which are located directly next to petrol stations that bear the names of famous Shi’ite martyrs. (Online Access: www.marcopolo-reloaded.com)

Nowadays, undoubtedly, two of the most sacred pilgrimage places in Iran are the shrine of Imām Reza (the eighth Shi’a Imām) in Mashhad and the shrine of his Sister Fatimeh Ma’sumeh in Qom. Accordingly, each year more than 25 million pilgrims visit the shrine of Imām Reza in Mashhad (Zamani-Farahani and Hendersom, 2011; Mehrnews, 3/4/2014). Besides the shrine of these two Imām and several Imāmzadehs, there are other shrines which are connected with Sufi saints (‘Arifis) such as Shaikh Abu-Hassan Kharqani and his master Bayazid Bastami; scientists and mystical poets like Avicenna (Pur Sina) in Hamedan, Mahmud Shabistari in Shabestar, Attar and Khayyam in Neyshabur, and Hafez and Sa’adi in Shiraz. Often next to a holy site, some natural elements such as trees or similar are venerated as well. Among the most important sacred places related to Zoroastrianism are the ancient temples of Chak Chak (Pir-e Sabz) near Yazd and Takht-e Soleymian near Tekab, which nowadays are visited mostly by tourists rather than pilgrims. But the most important political shrine, certainly, belongs to that of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Each year on the anniversary of his death, thousands of people from the whole country come to visit his shrine to pay their respects. In fact, the shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini, symbolizes the two faces of modern Iran: The religious and the national one.

Overall, in modern Iran, shrine pilgrimage has benefitted from the political circumstances prevailing in the Islamic Republic. Ziyārat, in addition to imāmzadehs, also includes visits to the tombs of the ‘Martyrs’ of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and to those fallen in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988).[12] Recently, Ayaz (2012) discusses the reasons behind this renewed promotion of pilgrimage to shrines, which are now extended to include the commemoration of fallen soldiers in the Iran-Iraq war and assassinated leaders (i.e. the Martyrs) of the Revolution. Firstly, this pilgrimage is a way to configure a new state system that sees Iran developing into a nation of believers. Secondly, she cites a practical reason: Many holy places that are important to Iranian Shi’ites are located outside Iran and were almost inaccessible during the Iran-Iraq war and the tension with Saudi Arabia.[13]

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12. This form of (qasi) religious pilgrimage is known as ‘war tourism’ in the literature.
13. There is also a historical precedent during the era of Safavid-Ottoman relations (16th century), when political restrictions were imposed on Iranian pilgrims entering Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem (which were under the control of the Ottomans). Instead, the Safavid Shah Abbas II encouraged pilgrimage to shrines inside Iran (Rizvi, 2009).
Conclusion

Pilgrimage, or religiously motivated travel, plays a major role in the social life of Muslims and is an important part of Islamic fabric. From North Africa, to the Middle East and Central, and South / Southeast Asia, shrine pilgrimage is common among Muslims. Numerous Sufi lodgings (khanequahs), shrines, schools, mosques, tombs (mazars), and mausoleums of saints, martyrs, Sufi-masters, and other holy men and women, attract millions of pilgrims, who travel substantial distances to these centres. According to Islamic traditions, Muslims are encouraged to travel, not only to bear witness to the greatness of God, but also to gain knowledge, learn about other cultures, and meet pious and wise people. Generally, the ‘religious’ travels of Muslims around the world are classified into two forms: Mandatory (Hajj) and voluntary (ziyārat). An important distinction should therefore be made between Hajj and ziyārat. The Hajj is considered to be the ‘official’ or ‘normative’ form of Islamic pilgrimage with well-established rituals, whereas the ziyārat is a ‘popular’ (i.e. volkstümlich) or ‘alternative’ form of pilgrimage which is practiced in different forms among people from different cultures. Among the regions where shrine pilgrimage (ziyārat) is strongly popular and practiced is the region with Turkic or Iranian cultures, especially in Iran and Central Asia. Since ancient times, Central Asia was home to various faiths such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaecism, Nestorian Christianity, Islam as well as local cults and beliefs, such as divination and worship of natural forces and objects. Among the most popular religious and cultural traditions in Central Asia are the veneration of saints (avliyā) and visits (ziyārat) to their shrines (mazār), practices which are widely undertaken in both rural and urban areas. Numerous followers who believe in the miraculous power of saints and holy men (valis - also known as avliyo) make pilgrimage (ziyārat) to sites which are presumed to be graves of such individuals, or some other physical memorial.

In Iran ziyārat includes visits of believers to sacred sites (ziyāratgah in Persian), which can be natural features (such as springs, trees, stones, etc.) or buildings related to Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish, or Islamic beliefs. Places frequented by Muslim pilgrims can be Saqqa-khāneh, Khānegāh (a Sufi lodging), or religious schools (madrase).

Special kinds of holy places are imānzadeh which are originally dedicated to descendents of Shi’ite Imāms. It is estimated that there are about 10,000 - 12,000 imānzadehs and holy shrines in Iran. Besides the shrine of Imam Reza (the most famous shrine) and several Imānzadeh, there are other shrines which are connected with Sufi saints (ʿArifs), scientists, mystical poets, and so on. The most important political shrine in Iran is the shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic which on the anniversary of his death is visited by thousands of people from the whole country.

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CHTN (Cultural Handicraft Tourism News) (2013) ‘last year more than 50 milions travelers visit the shrines in Iran’ online access under www.chtn.ir (06.05.2013)


