Although seeking medical treatment has been one of the main reasons for people traveling abroad over centuries, it took a long time for ‘medical tourism’ to become one of the most lucrative industries in the world that attracts millions of tourists annually to countries offering high quality medical services. According to the World Tourism Organization, the turnover of medical tourism in the world totaled 100 billion US$ by the end of 2012. Although ‘medical tourism’ is a new business for many developing nations, it is turning into a lucrative industry in countries like Iran.

For several reasons Iran has the potential to become one of the leading countries in the field. According to the Iranian Cultural, Handcrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHTO), within the past decade, Iran’s medical tourism sector shows a growth rate of 20% to 25%. These numbers are considerable especially considering the fact that it was only after 2003 that Iranian Ministry of Health started planning on developing medical tourism. One year later, in 2004, the development of medical tourism became a priority after establishment of the ICHTO as an independent body. Figures are also
noticeable when looking at the global growth rate of medical tourism which, according to the World Tourism Organization, was about 10% to 12% in 2012. Based on such statistics, ICHTO management now believes in Iran’s relative advantage in the field in comparison to its Middle Eastern rivals. However, there are further reasons to support belief in such a relative advantage.

Iran’s geographic position is a main factor. Neighboring 15 developing countries which are mainly inferior in medical services quality, offers Iran a target market of around 200 millions of people. Its climate variability is another geographic factor. But geography by itself does not explain the abovementioned growth rate. As such there are four other factors that can be described as underpins of Iran’s advantage in medical tourism and its high growth rate. First is the low-priced medical services offered by Iranian health sector. There are always those medical tourists who travel from developed and medically advanced countries seeking better affordable medical services.

The second reason is the exchange rate fluctuations. Iranian Rials’ value has dropped rapidly within the past four years and lost two – third of its value. As a result, under the new conditions, Iranian medical services are offered in one – third of their previous prices to medical tourists. This situation resulted in a flow of medical tourists into Iran mainly from its neighboring countries, especially from Azerbaijan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf countries.

The third reason is Iran’s well educated and skilled workforce in medical treatment and healthcare compared to other main destinations of medical tourism in the Middle East. Its scientific development in some medical specialties has enhanced its position in the field. For instance, Iran is among the worlds’ top five countries in biotech.

The fourth factor is Iran’s reformed rules and regulations in granting visas to medical tourists. In an attempt to boost its tourism sector, Iran has facilitated the regulations of granting visas to medical tourists and their companions. These regulations have long been an obstacle to Iranian tourism industry.

**The Main Medical Treatments**

The aforementioned reasons have paved the way for more development in the medical tourism sector which attracted around 200.000 tourists in 2012 with an income of one billion US$. Among the main medical treatments sought by tourists in Iran are infertility treatment, dentistry, plastic surgery, heart surgery, cancer-related diseases, ophthalmology and healing waters. The main markets for the Iranian medical tourism in recent years have been Azerbaijan, Iraq, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It is noticeable that at the same period, Turkey has been the second medical tourism destination among Islamic nations. Being a target market for Iranian medical tourism, Turkey indicates Iran’s relative advantage both in terms of its medical services’ reasonable prices and their high qualities and advanced technologies in certain fields.

Up until now, the Iranian provinces of Tehran, Khorasan Razavi, Eastern Azerbaijan, Gilan, Ardabil and Fars have been the main medical tourism destinations respectively. Planning to develop the infrastructure and enhance the qualities of health services for medical tourists, ICHTO, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, has specified the following provinces for medical tourism: Tehran for tuberculosis and lung disorders; Khorasan Razavi for ophthalmology, skin care, heart surgery and orthopedics; Fars for liver and kidney diseases and marrow transplants; Yazd for infertility; Qom for its sun and desert potential; Hamedan, Ilam and Zanjan for herbal medicine.

Unfortunately there are no official statistics on the numbers of medical tourists and Iran’s income from it for the years since 2012. Nevertheless, because of the continuation of the reasons behind its development in the decade leading to 2012, and also because ICHTO and the Ministry of Health have
been trying to sign agreements with countries of Iran’s medical tourism main target markets, one can assume that the sectors’ rapid growth has continued after 2012. Unofficial figures, as well, further underpin this assumption: as to 2014, 300.000 medical tourists visited Iran. Iranian official bodies concerned with medical tourism are planning for Iran to be the hub of it within the Muslim World, but it is yet to see to what extent its potential will crystallize.