



The Iranian passport is the biggest obstacle to citizens' travel freedoms, but not for the reason you know

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In today's irreversibly globalised world, international travelling and mobility are not merely deemed a privilege, but a fundamental entitlement the informed and probing citizens of the 21st century assertively expect the governments to provide.

To a large extent, the power of the passports people hold illustrates the standing of their countries in the community of nations, the shades of respectful treatment they receive while away from home, and in many cases, the boundaries of their freedoms and prerogatives.

Last October, the London-headquartered global citizenship and residence advisory firm Henley & Partners published its quarterly repertoire of the most desirable passports in terms of their power in facilitating international mobility.

In the Henley Passport Index, 199 passports are ranked according to the number of countries they enable their holders to visit visa-free. At the helm of the table, Japan, Singapore, Germany and South Korea triumph as the nations with the most potent passports, giving their citizens the right to travel to more than 190 countries without needing a visa.

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The register has determined that Iran ranks 107th in the world, tied with Lebanon and Sudan, coming into view as a tenuous travel document enabling visa-free travel to only 41 destinations. A perfunctory review of the roster reveals that Iran is faring worse than the crisis-hit South Sudan, Cuba beleaguered by decades of US sanctions, and authoritarian states Eritrea and Turkmenistan.

It is a given that global immigration regulations are tailored by the high-income countries in the north to contain movement from the global south and ensure flows of immigration from these countries, where people usually grapple with a constellation of political, economic and social crises, are chocked.

These immigration standards are moulded by major powers prohibitively is defensible in the eyes of those who delineate these guidelines, but deep down, such curbs speak volumes about the inequities that have made the gaps between nations unbridgeable in what is supposedly the age of connectivity.

Yet, for Iran, the trifling credibility of its passport should be chalked up to a number of other variables that do not necessarily reflect the universally inhibitory immigration codes, but represent self-inflicted wounds that it has suffered because of the policies that have pitched it into isolation.

Aside from the fact that the Islamic Republic leadership has an odd preference for avoiding global integration, resists joining international organisations and treaties and prevaricates over opening the doors of a country with thousands of years of documented history so that globetrotters can explore its charms firsthand, what has made the Iranian passport so fragile is that empowering it has actually never been a concern.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of framing and bolstering the nation's overseas agenda. But this underbudgeted apparatus, beset by a dearth of well-trained diplomats and proficient experts, has recurrently failed, since 1979, to take initiatives that win respect for Iranians abroad, exhibit the country as a respectable constituent of the world order, and alleviate the consular and professional challenges facing Iranians.

The acute flaws of diplomatic setup and the negligence of consecutive foreign ministers to shoring up the faculty of the Iranian passport have spawned an intractable dilemma: a young, educated and outward-looking population is increasingly eager to crisscross the world and decouple itself from the isolation hanging over the country, but it is simply stuck.

The bottom line is that Iranians have to countenance a panoply of bureaucratic complexities, lengthy queues outside embassies and long waiting times to obtain visas for literally every country. They have long complained of kaleidoscopic discriminations and being treated as second-rate citizens at consulates, ports of entry, immigration offices and in public, just because they do not own an elite travel document.

But little has changed the ugly truth that they are stripped of normal mobility, not even like the sort enjoyed by Singaporeans and Norwegians, but the accesses that people in their proximity, including Turkey, Georgia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have to the outside world because their governments have invested in the right priorities.

For many Iranians, visiting Turkey, one of the few nations with a visa-waiver agreement with the Islamic Republic, resonates as a quantum leap, and getting to the borders of Europe and North America remains a Sisyphean task. It is not about finances. It is about quandaries.

The government has scarcely embarked on negotiations with interlocutors, including even its cordial allies, to clinch visa abolition deals. This is what countries do routinely to beef up the distinction of their passports and make travelling more convenient, as well as project an appealing image of themselves.

Today, Russia applies a strict visa policy on Iranians – Russia is purportedly Tehran's "strategic ally" and the anchor of its security. Belarus, often tagged the last dictatorship in Europe and a genial comrade of Tehran, requires Iranian citizens to obtain a visa. The same applies to Muslim-majority Algeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Tunisia, Jordan and Tajikistan, which demand visas.

Amid these inconveniences, corrupt practices have sprung up for setting up emergency appointments and speeding up the processing of applications, often involving the collusion of Tehran-based embassies, travel agencies and well-off middlemen who cash in on people's travel frenzy to make fortunes.

Iranians continue to scramble for freedom of movement, contending with a double whammy of hardline travel measures enforced to prevent them, usually considered "high-risk citizens" in the immigration lexicon, from getting to voguish borders, and the incompetence of their own government in improving the status quo.

Ironically, the criminal records of Iranian citizens as immigrants and foreign visitors have conventionally been squeaky clean and beyond reproach as attested by national security agencies.

According to a 2019 Cato Institute study, between 1975 and 2017, foreign terrorism originating from Iran caused "zero casualties" in the United States, while in the same period, terrorists from UAE were responsible for 313 killings, and assailants from Saudi Arabia murdered 2,351 people on the US soil.

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But even these somewhat impeccable credentials, mirroring a consistent pattern of the behaviour of Iranians overseas, have not convinced the world powers to relax their restrictions. The last time a major Western country made such concessions was 2017 when Serbia jettisoned its visa requirements for Iranians, and after almost a year, under pressure by the European Union, reinstated the visa regime.

The onus remains on the government in Tehran to remedy what is apparently an impasse in the Iranian people's global outreach and connectivity. One of the few occasions the idea of giving a facelift to the public's travel rights was broached by a politician was the 2013 presidential campaign when the moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani promised to "retrieve respect" for the Iranian passport as president. His two administrations, however, did not take any steps to that effect.

Over the past four decades, the government has lackadaisically shelved the task of integrating Iran in the world context and ameliorating the nation's image, inducing the veneration of the Iranian passport.

The mobility drought continues to be a thorn in the side of millions of Iranians who wish to scale up their external connections and navigate new spaces on the world map, but are not able to. The tide can be turned. It is only dependent on the authorities in Tehran realising that they have a real responsibility to pull off change.