



Challenges and Opportunities in the Opening Up of Van as a Destination to the Iraqi Tourism Market

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Abstract

The competitive nature of tourism and its dynamics that require renewal increase the importance of studies that will enable destination-based development at the local level within Turkey. In this sense, with the emergence of localization tendencies, local identities and local values are reproduced in cities. It is important to make an analysis of the current situation, challenges and opportunities in terms of tourism markets, due to the geographical location of Van as a destination, its climate, migration from the surrounding provinces, historical and cultural ties, terrorism problems and it being culturally open to change. The main purpose of this study is to critically evaluate Van's current tourism potential, from the point of view of Iraqi citizens, through the opinions of the participants, and to reveal the impact and change through knowledge in the field. Qualitative research was used as the research method. In this context, face-to-face interviews were held with local stakeholders working on Iraqi tourism in the collection of qualitative data. The conclusions reached in this research are as follows. Van has not been able to reveal and manage its tourism potential, due to a variety of reasons in recent years. Van's low recognition can be seen in the Iraqi market, and that Iraqis come to Van independently of any promotion, lobby or information tour activities. In addition, it is concluded that the city of Van has the potential to achieve fast and effective results from the Iraqi tourism market, thanks to its geographical and cultural proximity and strong historical ties. Another result is that since there is no direct air transportation to Van from Iraq, no data other than the number of foreign visitors entering through the border gates could be found. Therefore, the planning of direct flights between Iraq and Van, as a priority, remains important.

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1. Introduction

Since tourism is one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world, it is also one of the most concentrated areas (Bahar, 2006). According to data from the UN World Tourism Organization, the tourism sector has an important place with more than 100 million jobs and a million-dollar value-added capacity (UNWTO, 2022). However, tourism, which represents a main source of income, especially for developing countries, necessitates renewal and development for the stakeholders of the sector due to the increasing diversity and competition among destinations (Tosun, 2001, p. 301). For this reason, many destinations need local-scale studies that will highlight their competitive aspects and attractiveness (Karataş & Babür, 2013, p. 15). In order to meet this need, it is necessary to identify new markets and to analyze the characteristics of these markets and the demands and expectations within the market.

Efforts to create new source markets mean more tourism income, more employment and increased welfare, as well as certain challenges. In this sense, with the emergence of localization tendencies, local identities and local values are reproduced in cities (Bayraktar et al., 2017, p. 200). In this context, Van, which managed to become a prominent tourism destination with more than five hundred thousand domestic and foreign visitors in the pre-pandemic period (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022), took many local measures and new developments in the process of reconceptualizing local values in terms of tourism in order to produce, develop and make them sustainable.

This requires marketing strategies (Cihangir-Çamur, et.al., 2021). In addition, in order to market the tourism values of Van as a destination, the relations and characteristics between the components of the tourism sector and the factors affecting tourism should be well known (Davras & Uslu, 2019, p. 683).

It is understood that Iran and Iraq are the countries that Van as a destination receives the most visitors from among its close neighbor countries (TUIK, 2022). Although there are various academic studies on Iranians visiting Van, no study has been found in the literature on Iraqi tourists visiting Van. There is a report named 'Health Tourism Van Destination' in partnership with the Eastern Anatolia Development Agency (EADA) and the General Secretariat of Public Hospitals in Van. This report stands out as a study visit and a potential highlight report. There is a significant deficiency in the literature, especially regarding the opening of Van to the Iraqi market, and the opportunities and challenges it may encounter. In this context, this research carried out in Van is also important in terms of its current situation and challenges/opportunities in terms of tourism markets, due to its geographical location, climate, immigration from surrounding provinces, historical and cultural ties, terrorism problems and it being open to cultural change (Cihangir & Şeremet, 2020).

The main purpose of this study is to reveal Van's challenges related to the Iraqi tourism market and the opportunities it has in terms of local tourism stakeholders from a critical perspective. In this context, answers to the following research questions are sought:

- What are the experiences of the local tourism stakeholders in Van as a destination with the Iraqi market and the Iraqi people?
- What are the expectations of the local tourism stakeholders in Van as a destination with the Iraqi market and the Iraqi people?
- What are the challenges in opening Van as a destination to the Iraqi market?
- What are the opportunities for Van as a destination to open to the Iraqi market?

Qualitative research design was preferred in order to answer the research questions. The province of Van was chosen in order to best research the previously mentioned subjects. One of the most important reasons for choosing this site is that although Van has a high level of tourism potential, there has not been any specific academic study regarding the opening of Van as a destination to the Iraqi market as well as the process itself.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Features of the Destination

The concept of destination is expressed as 'a place worthy of travel or an extended visit' in the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2022). However, there are many definitions related to the concept of destination. The variety of definitions is due to the different structures of destinations, and the lack of certainty in terms of their borders (Akkuş, 2016: 88). While Vanhove (2017:21) defines destinations as 'a geographical area that can attract visitors from significant distances with attraction centers, and provide paid accommodation facilities depending on one or more government authorities', Buhalis (2000:97) defines 'a combination of tourism products offered to visitors in relation to each other'. Although destinations are considered to be a combination of various products, their presence and attractiveness make destinations a separate product (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009).

The fact that destinations have different structures causes different features, as well as being expressed by different definitions. Buhalis (2000:98) lists the characteristics of the destinations he refers to as 'Six A' as follows:

- i. **Attractions;** natural resources, artificial resources, special events, heritage items and special products.
- ii. **Accessibility;** systems and structures needed to obtain a widespread transportation network.
- iii. **Amenities;** accommodation facilities, food and beverage facilities, as well as other facilities related to tourist services.
- iv. **Available Packages (Scheduled Tours);** pre-planned tours by managers or agents.
- v. **Activities;** all activities available at the destination, and all activities that visitors can perform during their visit.
- vi. **Ancillary Services;** all other ancillary services, including healthcare, banking, postal and telecommunications services.

Morrison (2013), on the other hand, lists the main features that a destination can have;

- i. A geographical area with administrative border or borders.
- ii. Places where tourists can find accommodation.
- iii. A strong mix of destinations (restaurants and other facilities, transport, infrastructure and accommodation resources).
- iv. Tourism marketing effort.
- v. An organizational structure (DMO).
- vi. A new and strong image.
- vii. Regulatory laws and regulations.

Approaches to the characteristics of destinations are diverse. It is possible to say that this is related to the wide scope of the destinations. In order for the destinations to have administrative boundaries or not, to be expressed as a product that is a combination of many products, to have stakeholders and an organizational structure, to have attractiveness and various opportunities, to take place in the same place and at the same time, and to purchase the destination product, the consumer's product, getting to where you are is one of the prominent features of destinations.

2.2. Stakeholders of the Destination

The products and services offered at the destinations allow the destinations to be visited. It is also important how the products and services that the visitors encounter in the destination are presented, as well as what they are. It is thought that the complexity of product and service presentation and the observance of a non-cooperative process will affect visitor satisfaction. Therefore, stakeholder communication and collaboration are of great importance.

Phillips et al. (2019:2) define stakeholders as 'persons or groups who are affected by or affect the success of an organization or organization'. Aas et al. (2005:31) express the advantages of stakeholder cooperation as;

- avoidance of conflicts and associated costs in the long term
- providing effective cost management by pooling resources
- cooperation adds value due to the high level of knowledge, foresight and skill of a number of stakeholders:

Stakeholders of a business are employees, managers, customers, and suppliers. The stakeholders of a destination are the following: local people; tourists visiting the destination; non-governmental organizations; provincial and district administrators; local administrations; tourism businesses and other support businesses; and professional organizations and educational institutions which can be expressed as the main stakeholders. In order to express the stakeholders of the destination, a number of classifications have been made by various researchers (Şeremet et. al., 2022). Buhalis (2000: 99) groups the stakeholders of a destination as local people, tourists, tour operators, tourism entrepreneurs and the government. Cihangir-Çamur & Cihangir (2017) survey tourism entrepreneurship from the local perspective and investigates the location-specific features of this type. McIntosh et al. (1995) mention four stakeholder groups, and classify them as local residents, tourists, local public officials and business owners.

When these definitions are considered and a comprehensive evaluation is made, it is possible to say that all parties that directly or indirectly affect the supply and demand relationship in the destination are the stakeholders of that destination.

2.3. Turkey and the Iraq Tourism Market

It is known that Turkey and Iraq have close relations due to their geographical proximity, as well as their common historical background, cultural and neighbourly ties (Önal, 2020:78). These close relations have also shown their effect in the economic field, and a trade volume of \$20.7 billion is created with the import and export realized (TRT Haber, 2021). Along with these developing economic relations, Turkey, which has an important potential in the tourism sector, manages to become an indispensable tourism destination for Iraqis. Moreover, Turkey's positive image on the Iraqi people and the opportunities it offers cause Iraqis to form a tourism travel habit towards Turkey (Dağ, 2020).

While the number of Iraqis visiting Turkey was 285,229 in 2009, this figure increased by 482% in 2019, reaching 1,374,899 by the end of the decade. The number of visitors, which experienced a serious decrease with the Covid-19 epidemic, started to recover in 2021 and reached 822,758 by August, 2022 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022; TUIK, 2022).

Table 1. Number of Iraqis visiting Turkey

NUMBER OF IRAQI VISITORS TO TURKEY BY YEAR			
YEAR	NUMBER OF VISITORS	YEAR	NUMBER OF VISITORS
2005	107.968	2014	857.246
2006	123.118	2015	1.094.144
2007	180.217	2016	420.831
2008	250.130	2017	896.876
2009	285.229	2018	1.172.896
2010	280.328	2019	1.374.896
2011	369.033	2020	387.587
2012	533.149	2021	836.624
2013	730.639	2022 ¹	822.758

Source: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022; TUIK, 2022

As shown in Table 1, the interest of the Iraqi people in Turkey has been increasing over the years. In 2017, 2018 and 2019, Iraq became the eighth country visiting Turkey most and the seventh in 2020. Iraqi visitors became the sixth group to visit Turkey the most in 2021 (TUIK, 2022). There are several reasons for this increase. These reasons are considered to be features, such as Turkey’s historical and natural beauty, geographical and cultural proximity, close flight distance and hospitality.

It can be seen that Iraqis visit Turkey for health treatment purposes due to the inadequacy of the health infrastructure in their own country (EADA, 2016:35). Approximately 50,000 patients come to Turkey from Iraq annually. Considering the health tourism potential of Iraq, these figures are half of it, the remaining 50% potential preferring Iran, USA, Jordan, England and other European countries predominantly (Karaca, 2021). The fact that Turkey’s quality of service delivery in health has reached a level that can compete with the countries in question makes Iraq an important target market in terms of health tourism. Therefore, Iraq is known as the first country where international patients come to Turkey, where 1,300,000 patients preferred to receive health services in 2020 (Güllü, 2022).

The type of travel or vehicle preferred by Iraqis coming to Turkey is effective in attracting visitors to Van. The absence of direct air, sea and railway transportation between Van and Iraq directs the arrival of Iraqis to Van by way of land. The fact that method of travel between Iraq and Van is not known because it is not registered makes it necessary to make an accurate estimation. The type of travel used by Iraqi visitors on their arrival in Turkey is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Breakdown of Iraqi visitors by mode of transport

BREAKDOWN OF IRAQI VISITORS TO TURKEY BY MODE OF TRANSPORT				
Year	Marine	Air	Road	Railroad
2018	1.802	786.932	384.857	25
2019	1.155	912.215	461.484	42
2020	320	172.379	214.880	8
2021	201	414.669	404.960	-

Source: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022

¹ 2022 data covers January-September months.

When the visits of Iraqi citizens are examined, it can be seen that 67.09% of the transportation in 2018, 66.34% in 2019 and 44.47% in 2020 is by air. It can also be seen that the number of vehicles, which decreased in 2020 due to the pandemic, started to rise again in 2021 (Ministry Of Culture and Tourism, 2022). In addition, the difference between air transportation and land transportation vehicles is also decreasing. This situation increases the probability that Iraqi tourists who enter Turkey by road will be found to be proportionally more compared to previous years.

Road transportation is mostly carried out through three border gates, located on the Turkey-Iraq border. These gates are the Şırnak Habur Border Gate, Hakkari Çukurca Üzümlü Border Gate and Hakkari Derecik Umurlu Border Gate. Iraqi visitors coming to Van by way of road usually use these gates. Therefore, these gates are of great importance for Van. When the distance of these gates to Van is examined, it can be seen that the Habur Border Gate is approximately 450 km from Van, the Üzümlü Border Gate is 250 km, and the Umurlu Border Gate is 300 km. Table 4 shows the number of visitors coming to Turkey from the Habur and Üzümlü Border Gates.

Table 3. Habur and Üzümlü Border Gates entrance numbers

Year	Habur Border Gate	Üzümlü Border Gate
2018	356.719	21.477
2019	426.475	28.075
2020	210.130	1.993
2021	389.255	18.066

Source: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022

The fact that the true numbers of Iraqi visitors to Van cannot be accessed makes it necessary to comment on Turkey’s data. Most Iraqis enter Turkey by land through the Habur Border Gate. The Üzümlü Border Gate, which is another border gate, which became operational in 2017, is less preferred by Iraqi citizens entering Turkey (Çiftçi Öksüz, 2021).

2.4. Van Tourism

The province of Van has a rich historical and cultural heritage, as it has an important geographical location, is important settlement area and has hosted many civilizations since ancient times. The Van province, which has been dominated by the Urartians, Medes, Persians, Hurrians, Byzantines, Seljuks, Karakoyunlus, Akkoyunlus, Safavids and Ottomans since the 4,000s B.C., has turned into a city where every civilization has left something of its character (Van Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020).

The Van province is an important tourism destination in the Van Lake basin due to its natural and cultural areas. It has various attractive elements, especially the Van Cat, Van Breakfast, Muradiye Waterfall, Başkale Yavuzlar Fairy Chimneys, the Old City of Van and the Van Museum (Şeremet & Cihangir, 2022). In addition to cultural tourism, nature tourism, coastal tourism, winter tourism, gastronomy tourism, faith tourism and sports tourism, it also has an important potential in terms of other types of tourism. Therefore, Van is a province that receives the most visitors among all the provinces in the region, as it is rich in tourism potential (Ministry Of Culture and Tourism, 2022).

Considered as an important attraction for the destination, Lake Van is the world’s largest soda lake, and Turkey’s largest lake. One hundred and three species of phytoplankton (planktonic plant components), thirty-six species of zooplankton (planktonic animal components) and a single fish species, the pearl mullet (*Chalcalburnus tarichi*) live in Lake Van. The measurement around the lake is over 400 kilometers (Ministry Of Culture and Tourism, 2022).

In addition to Lake Van, the strategic advantage of its location, in terms of natural and cultural heritage, the gastronomic diversity, endemic animal and plant diversity, and the Middle East tourism market, offers Van a notable opportunity in the field of destination competitiveness.

Akdamar Island and its Church, Van Castle, Hoşap Castle, and Ayanis Castle, all located around Lake Van, Hüsrev Paşa Mosque and Horhor Mosque in the Old City of Van are just a few of the historical structures in the region (Van Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020).

It is thought that the number of domestic and foreign tourists visiting Van over the years has increased due to the increase in the number of accommodation facilities serving in the tourism sector, the improvement in service quality, the disappearance of security-related problems and various developments.

Table 4. Numbers of visitors to Van

VISITORS TO VAN BY YEAR						
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Domestic	183.418	584.040	546.758	604.041	391.256	638.652
Foreign	50.968	486.220	317.286	444.726	39.936	86.046
Total	234.386	1.070.260	864.044	1.048.767	431.192	724.698

Source: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022

A significant majority of foreign tourists visiting the province of Van are Iranians. Van, where nearly 50,000 foreign visitors came in 2012, was visited by approximately 445,000 foreigners in 2019. Van, which experienced a significant decrease in the number of foreign tourists because of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, recovered in 2021, and subsequently hosted 265,000 foreign tourists up to August 2022 (Ministry Of Culture and Tourism, 2022).

3. Methodology

In this study, the case study approach was used as a model within strategy of the qualitative design (Cihangir & Şeremet, 2022). Qualitative research is a method that adopts a holistic perspective, considers researched facts and events in their own context, and examines the meanings that people attribute to events and facts with an interpretive approach (Altunisik et al., 2007). In qualitative research, three types of data are collected; data on the environment, data on the process, and data on perceptions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In this study, data on perceptions were collected. The development of tourism in Van, the way the people of Van perceive tourism, the level of knowledge and attitude of local tourism stakeholders towards Van tourism, the challenges and opportunities in opening the Van destination to the Iraqi market, the knowledge levels of local tourism stakeholders about the Iraqi market and the Iraqi people, all express the importance of the research.

In this research, representatives of public and private institutions and organizations working on Iraqi tourism, non-governmental organization officials, public personnel with health tourism experience, officials of transportation companies that organize flights from Van to Iraq, travel agencies and accommodation sector officials, were all used by the snowball sampling method. Interviews were also held.

In the interviews, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with a total of fifteen people, both men and women, by asking questions in order to determine the opportunities and challenges in the opening of the destination of Van to the Iraqi market. The effort of researchers to reach too many participants numerically is considered to be an important and frequently repeated mistake (Creswell, 2002; Makatouni, 2002). For this reason, the quality of the interviews took precedence over the quantity. In this study, the number of participants was limited to fifteen people, due to the repetition of answers received after reaching a certain number of participants. In addition, considering the Iraqi market as a new tourism market for Van, more people with experience in the Iraqi market could not be reached. This is an important factor in the selection of the number of participants.

The semi-structured interview technique is a technique in which the researcher conducts an interview with questions prepared in advance, with different or related questions being added according to the natural flow of the interview, allowing the researcher to open and elaborate on answers (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2000). Research questions prepared to reveal the purpose of the research may differ according to the interests and experience of the respondents during the interview (Coskun et al., 2015). In the analysis of the data, the data collected from an interpretive perspective were analyzed with content analysis. Thematic and conceptual inferences were made within the framework of the findings.

4. Findings

In this section, the findings are evaluated based on the data obtained from the answers given to the questions of the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted face-to-face. The participants of the research consisted of fifteen people who were local stakeholders of the destination and who had efforts to open the destination to the Iraqi market. Since there were fewer women working on this subject, a significant number of the participants

were men. The participants consisted of different age groups, with the average age of the participants being thirty-seven. A majority of the participants consisted of private business owners (sector representatives) and related non-governmental organizations. Representatives of public institutions and organizations related to tourism were also among the participants of the research. When the participants are ranked according to their education level, the participants of a secondary education level are in the first place. In the second place are those with a bachelor's degree. It was noted that none of the participants had received any training related to tourism, all of them had experience abroad, and almost all of them had traveled to Iraq at least once. In addition, while evaluating the findings, the personality traits of the participants and the achievements, knowledge and perspectives of the Iraqi citizens towards the destination of Van were included. In the light of the information obtained from the interviews, and as a result of the observations, it can be seen that various themes are formed.

According to the data obtained from the participants, the findings of the research are classified as follows; the challenges encountered in the Iraqi market, the opportunities of the Iraqi market, and the basic requirements that must be fulfilled in all market-related processes. In addition, according to the information obtained from the participants, a SWOT analysis of the Iraqi tourism market of Van was made. The SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, used for individuals, enterprises and even destinations, reveals the strong and weak points and addresses the opportunities that can be utilised and threats being under the influence of.

4.1. Problems

In the interviews, it is possible to say that the participants mostly focused on 'problems', both in tourism-related activities and in the process of entering the Iraqi market. Issues such as security, lack of cooperation and not being able to use the existing potential are among the main problems.

Security

The security problem is considered to be a problem that the region has been under the influence of for many years. Although it is thought to be a problem that has been largely eliminated, it is stated that people visiting the destination experience a little anxiety about security. It is thought that the main factor in such uneasiness is perception-oriented, rather than there being an existence of the problem.

"The security problems in Van have disrupted tourism. From the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, tourists from many parts of the world came to Van. However, we lost this feature because of terrorist incidents. At the moment, trust has been established, but we have not completely destroyed this image. In those years, there were people from many countries, such as Greece, the USA and Germany. Iraqis can be very uneasy on the point of security. The perception of security is important." (P8)

"The perception of security is one of our most important disadvantages. People on both sides have concerns about terrorism. However, with the successes achieved in the security issue, on both the Turkish and the Iraqi sides for the last three years, there has been no security problem for the last three years. For example, there are sixteen security points on the eighty km road from the border gate to Duhok on the Iraqi side; every five km. No problem." (P4)

A number of the participants stated that the security problem, which was considered to be an important problem in the past, has been eliminated to a great extent, but perception management in this regard has not been handled well. The need for studies on the destruction of negative perceptions is emphasized.

"In the past, security issues were a huge hurdle. We wouldn't say it's that size today. It's in an almost nonexistent position. However, we have not destroyed the perception. Not only Iraqis, but every tourist, brings a bit of shyness and prejudice with them. However, it is our duty to destroy this perception. Let's make introductions, let's go and explain ourselves, let's talk about our city. Let's tell you that such problems are no more. This is our duty." (P15)

Cooperation

The issue of cooperation, which is considered to be an important problem by the research participants, was first discussed in relation to the openness of the destination stakeholders to cooperation. The participants stated that cooperation is an important deficiency and this is an obstacle for the destination to use to its potential.

"...If you are trying to enter a new market, you should have already settled the issue of cooperation. I'm sorry if the tourist feels that there is a voice coming from every head; you cannot sell it correctly if you have gold." (P15)

"Common sense is one of the issues that this city cannot compete with. If you cooperate, you can accurately present everything you have." (P3)

"Today, one of the most important challenges ahead is acting together. Everyone is acting separately from each other; we must come together and make this sustainable." (P6)

As will be discussed in detail in the following parts of the study, health tourism is considered to be an important reason for Iraqis to come to Van. However, the problem of cooperation is also expressed as an important obstacle to increasing the contribution of health tourism. The participants stated that there is a desire for cooperation, but that there are a number of legal obstacles in this regard.

"We want to cooperate with the agencies, but we encounter certain procedural obstacles." (P10)

"...So, as an agency, I bring patients, not only to private hospitals, but also to public hospitals. However, there are a number of points that we cannot solve legally. There is also the problem of transparency; we may not know what to do. In other words, it would not be a lie if we say that we can cooperate, but we cannot find the right environment for it." (P11)

Failure to Use Potential

"...it doesn't matter what you have, it matters what you can use. What can you sell? You have potential, but are you evaluating it?" (P8)

One important issue is whether the potential is used effectively or not. Most of the participants stated that the destination had important potential in terms of tourism attractiveness factors and that this potential cannot be accurately evaluated. However, it should be noted that no suggestions were made on how to evaluate this potential.

"The province of Van has the potential to attract the attention of Iraqi citizens with its climate, natural beauty and its lake. Due to the rising temperatures in Iraq, especially in the summer months, Van, which has a temperate climate, has the potential to be a reason for the preference of Iraqi tourists. The city of Duhok, which is the closest point to Van by way of the Çukurca Üzümlü Border Gate, is the most popular place in terms of health tourism. As you can see, we have a very important potential. However, can we turn this into an opportunity? Unfortunately no." (P14)

"It should also be noted that Van also has disadvantages. For example, the travel time between the well visited Akdamar Island and Van Castle is more than two hours. What kind of Van do we have in front of us? There is a Van that has many advantages, but cannot use them." (P8)

4.2. Opportunities

"In the 1990s, there were many tourists from Europe and the Far East in Van. Now this situation has disappeared." (P13)

"Actually, there is a wide variety of attractions in Van and everyone can find what they are looking for, and these are our brand values. These attractions have the qualities that Iraqi tourists look for and prefer, as every tourist does." (P7)

The participants suggest that there are various opportunities that Van has. These refer to the important opportunities that Van has in being preferred as a tourism destination. Health tourism, which is also expressed as a main reason for Iraqi tourists to come to Van, is discussed under a separate sub-title due to its importance.

Reasons for Preference

It is stated that the destination of Van offers various attractions. These factors play an important role in choosing Van as a destination.

"The Van Lake basin is full of riches. Since these are interesting for tourists coming to Van, Van has too many values to count. We have brands such as the Van Breakfast, Van Lake, Van Cat, and important handicrafts, such as niello silver processing." (P3)

Considering the reasons for Van's preference, it can be revealed that climate and nature are among the attractions that are emphasized. However, not only attractions are effective in the preference of Van as a destination. The fact that Van is an affordable destination for service delivery, the hospitality of the local people, the cultural proximity, and the similarity of the population with the Iraqi people are also expressed as important factors in the choice of the destination.

Climate and Nature

"The province of Van is more advantageous than Diyarbakir and Batman in terms of its nature, natural beauty, general climate, and it being cooler in summer." (P5)

It is stated that the climatic conditions and nature of Van are effective in the preference of tourists. However, it should not be forgotten that Van is in an important competitive process with cities such as Batman and Diyarbakir in this regard. As will be stated in the later parts of the study, the situation regarding border gates makes this competition more challenging for Van. There is also the fact that Van has an advantage as it is cooler in terms of climatic conditions, compared to cities such as Batman and Diyarbakir. Actually, the fact that the participants emphasized that Iraqis prefer cooler places, even in their own country, benefits Van in this sense.

"There is a place called Elibeg (Alibey) Stream in the north of Iraq, consisting of streams and a small number of trees, which thousands of Arabs visit every year. Our beauty cannot even be compared to those there. If the necessary work is done, we will not be limited to those coming from the north, we will also receive tourists from the south." (P4)

"While it is 50 degrees in Baghdad, Iraq, it is 40 degrees in Erbil and Duhok. Just because of this temperature difference, 800,000 Arabs go to the north of Iraq in eight months because of their preference for a temperate region." (P9)

High temperatures in Iraq are an important motivating factor for Iraqis to travel to places other than their current location 'just because it is cooler'. According to the data of the General Directorate of Meteorology, since 1939, the average temperature in the summer months in Van has been measured as 28,5°C in August (<https://www.mgm.gov.tr>). This data significantly supports the discourse of the participants on this issue, and represents an important opportunity that should be evaluated.

Reasonable price

Service delivery of the destination is important. Having more affordable prices compared to other destinations provides an important advantage in terms of Van being a preference. This opinion of the participants is considered as another factor that makes the destination attractive, because Iraqi visitors often come with their families.

"We offer services at prices far below Turkish standards at the point of tourism. We are 50-60% cheaper than similar accommodation facilities in other cities. We are also a cheaper city in terms of food and textiles." (P11)

"Due to the tradition of Iraqis, who choose our city for health tourism, forty-five people accompany the patient. While they are here, they can be examined and four or five people usually stay. Each patient coming within the scope of health tourism arrives with four or five other people. The number of visitors therefore increases from one to five. The hospital infrastructure there is poor and very expensive. Turkey is both much better quality and much cheaper." (P6)

Hospitality

Hospitality is one of the most important characteristics of the local people. The fact that visitors from Iraq encounter a hospitable people makes them give priority to Van for future visits.

"Van's strongest aspect in tourism; it has a respectful and hospitable people (to foreigners)." (P2)

"One of the factors that make Iraqi citizens satisfied with Van is the hospitality of the people of Van." (P1)

Cultural Affinity

Due to the close neighborhood relations between Van and Iraq, cultural interaction is also high. It is possible to talk about many kinship relations. This situation highlights cultural affinity. Language, lifestyles and religious situations prevent Iraqis who come to Van from having difficulties in communicating. Therefore, cultural proximity plays an important role in Iraqis' preference for Van.

"It is a fact that they do not have a language barrier that attracts Iraqi tourists here, because Iraqis can easily do their shopping in Van and maintain their relations with tradesmen more comfortably, because they speak the common language." (P13)

"There are close cultural and historical ties between the citizens of the two countries. This is because I think that people living in the KRG region should prefer Van because of their kinship relations, cultural similarities and Kurdish being the common language." (P15)

Health Tourism

Health is considered to be an important factor in the arrival of Iraqis to Van. In this context, health tourism has a great importance for the Iraqi market. For this reason, the subject of health tourism has been evaluated as a specific sub-title. Based on the experiences of the participants, the main reason for the arrival of Iraqis who come to Van for health tourism is the inadequacy of Iraq's health infrastructure.

"Treatments in Iraq are generally limited to outpatient treatment, and in some procedures that require advanced surgical intervention, the doctors and health infrastructure may be insufficient. This situation pushes people to travel for health purposes." (P9)

"The Kurdish region in Iraq is especially in a medically weak condition. Despite the poor health infrastructure, health services are expensive." (P13)

"With the steps to be taken in health tourism, interest in Van and hospitals there may increase." (P11)

"Iraqis need hospitals in Van in the health sector. In 2019, an average of 4,000 to 5,000 Iraqi citizens came to Lokman Hekim Hospital." (P14)

Another issue emphasized by the participants is the feeling of trust of Iraqis. Thanks to this feeling, they realize long-term stays.

"In terms of health tourism, Lokman Hekim has a small polyclinic in Erbil. Iraqis have serious confidence in the Turkish Health System. Therefore, it is seen that those who come within the scope of health tourism stay for 25-30 days." (P7)

"The Iraqis both trust our healthcare system and have a lot of trust in the region. Our cultural ties are very effective in establishing this trust. That's why they come to Van. In other words, they come to Hakkari and from there to Van." (P1)

4.3. Requirements

"The cities of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) especially are a market that will make significant contributions to Van, and evaluations should focus on the cities of Erbil, Duhok and Zaho." (P10)

The participants argue that certain requirements come to the fore in the process of Van's entry into the Iraqi market. These requirements cover the improvement of tourism infrastructure, promotion, marketing and lobbying, and improvements related to border gates.

Tourism Infrastructure

In terms of tourism infrastructure, there is a particular focus on air transport. It is stated that the addition of reciprocal flights, and the realization of affordable flights, are important in terms of developing tourism and increasing its gains.

"It would be a very important development to have flights between Baghdad-Van and Erbil-Van. In the past, there were attempts to start charter flights between Erbil and Van, but they could not be implemented because of the burden. It would be really good if scheduled flights could start between these points." (P2)

"Ensuring the arrival of Iraqis to Van by air flights from Erbil and Baghdad will provide a very serious gain. We could not start Tehran-Van flights despite this intensity. For the development of tourism, the airline needs to be seriously engaged. In the first place, flights should be defined and prices should be kept suitable for promotional purposes to a certain extent." (P1)

Another prominent issue regarding the tourism infrastructure is the development of the health tourism infrastructure. The development of health institutions in Van is emphasized by the participants, ensuring that the units act with a focus on health tourism and the establishment of their units, as well as the establishment of offices in various regions in Iraq.

"Our healthcare infrastructure is lacking. The University hospital and District hospital remain very passive. We do not have a very good private hospital. Each hospital works on its own, but it is very limited. We cannot make enough use of health tourism. Our health tourism infrastructure is in bad shape." (P10)

"In order for health tourism to become widespread in Van, the relevant units of the hospitals should be strengthened, and not as a name or sign. When I applied to YYU Research Hospital in 2018, it was said that an authorization certificate should be obtained from the Ministry of Health. I am the only one with a health tourism authorization certificate. Our hospitals are very good, but their units need to focus on these activities. Hospitals need to do their own encouraging advertising. I think there is something missing here. Our hospitals need to increase their recognition by developing cooperation with hospitals in Erbil in Duhok. Offices need to be established in Erbil, and they need to advertise." (P2)

Promotion, Marketing and Lobbying Activities

The participants state that the destination has many attractive elements, but that there is a need for promotion and marketing studies on this subject. It is evaluated that promotion and marketing will provide information regarding the areas that will attract the attention of Iraqis, and will increase their arrival and expenditure at the destination.

"The basin of Lake Van, especially Akdamar Island, is full of riches. These are enough to attract the attention of tourists. As long as we make a good introduction." (P7)

"Promotion is the most important deficiency. We talk a lot about the Iraqi market, and about cities such as Diyarbakır, Mersin and Batman. However, they started the promotion and marketing business long ago. We are far behind in this regard. Visiting Iraqi tourists mostly come to visit their relatives in Hakkari and Van. They do not come with our effort. No-one should think that we are doing promotions or any similar work." (P14)

"Good publicity is needed for Iraqis to come here. We have not shown much interest in them in terms of marketing and promotion. We also need to invite the officials there and show them around." (P4)

The importance of information tours (infotours, famtrips) made to travel agencies and press organizations in promotion and marketing is stated. The benefits of recognition tours made at the destination are emphasized.

"Many Iranians come to Van, but spend little, Iraqis do not. They come in little, but they spend a lot. However, we could not introduce Van to Northern Iraq in a way. We did an info tour for a while, and those who saw Van were surprised. We should increase the number of such studies." (P11)

"Promotion is definitely publicity. The state should step into this business, the information should definitely be done. If we identify well-working agencies and companies and invite them to Van, this business will make a lot of noise. EADA, Governorship and Van Chamber of Commerce and Industry should own this business. Infotour, famtrip should carry out applications." (P1)

Another issue emphasized by the participants is lobbying activities. In this regard, it is expected that institutions and organizations with high representative power in the destination will carry out studies. The importance of carrying out promotional and marketing activities together with lobbying activities is emphasized.

"One of the things we need most is lobbying. Institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Governor's Office, the Culture and Tourism Directorate, and EADA should be the locomotive in this business. Then this relationship will develop with info tours. Billboards will be filled and various advertising activities will be carried out." (P12)

Border Gates

Another important issue that determines the arrival of Iraqis to Van is the situation of the border gates. The Şırnak Habur Border Gate, Hakkari (Çukurca) Üzümlü Border Gate and Hakkari (Derecik) Umurlu Border Gate are available for visitors from Iraq to enter Turkey. The fact that Iraqis use one of these gates on their arrival in Van reveals that the requirements for these gates are essential for Van tourism.

The Habur Border Gate is known as the gate through which most Iraqis enter Turkey. However, the distance between Van and the Habur Border Gate is considered to be an obstacle for visitors to come directly to Van. It is stated that with the completion of the highway between Van and Şırnak, this distance will be shortened, and the number of Iraqis coming to Van from the Habur Border Gate will increase.

“It is mentioned that the Çatak (Van) Şırnak highway will be opened to traffic in 2023. If this project is completed, the 550 km route will be shortened to 3.5 hours. If the project is realized, there will be a significant increase in the number of tourists.” (P3)

“Transportation from the Habur Border Gate takes 6.5-7 hours, and long distances make arrivals difficult. If the Şırnak-Van road ends, the distance will be reduced to 2.5-3 hours and it will make a significant contribution.” (P12)

“For those coming from the Habur side, Van-Silopi is 550 km, 7-8 hours away. Before coming to Van, there are Diyarbakır and Batman provinces, which are more advantageous for Iraqis.” (P9)

“For those coming from Habur, Van is further away. There are other provinces such as Batman and Mardin on the road.” (P5)

It is known that the Üzümlü and Derecik Umurlu border gates are closer to Van than the Habur Border Gate. However, the need for capacity building and 24-hour-based work related to the Üzümlü border gate is emphasized by the participants. In addition, necessary negotiations are needed to carry out road and other infrastructure works related to the Iraqi side of the Derecik Border Gate.

“The opening of the Üzümlü Border Gate was a very important step in terms of Van tourism. Studies are needed to modernize the border gate, improve its infrastructure capacity and operate on a 24-hour basis. Therefore, the Üzümlü Border Gate will benefit Van and Hakkari more than Habur.” (P1), (P4).

“The line from Duhok to Soran District addresses us. With the activation of the Derecik Border Gate, Erbil will be reduced to two hours. We now have an official border gate, but the roads on the Iraqi side are not suitable for transportation. If this problem is also solved in the future, the distance from Erbil to Derecik will be shortened significantly.” (P6)

4.4. SWOT Analysis

Finally, various inferences were made by making SWOT analysis of Van on the Iraqi tourism market.

Table 5. SWOT analysis of Van

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong historical and cultural ties, affinity relations with the Iraqis • Mild climate of Van • Lake Van • Stronger health infrastructure • Cheaper accommodation, food and beverage, and shopping compared to rival destinations • Having strong brand values (the Van Cat, Van Castle, Akdamar Island, and others) • Different tourism types (archeological, ecotourism, winter tourism, camping tourism, bird watching, mountaineering, mystery tourism and water sports) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of promotion to the Iraqis • Indifference of tourism sector stakeholders to the Iraqi market • Lack of air transport • Road transport network not being sufficiently developed • Distance of Habur Border Gate • Low number of facilities in terms of tourism sector infrastructure appealing to the upper income group
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Şırnak-Van Road to be commissioned by 2023 • Security problems coming to an end • Van being one of the closest destinations to meet the healthcare needs of Iraq 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility of disruption of the secure environment • Van being a city of earthquakes • Failure to sufficiently build a perception of confidence although security is established

5. Conclusion, Discussion and Contribution to the Theory

Within the framework of the findings obtained from the research, at the top of the problems encountered in the Iraqi market are security, lack of cooperation and the inability to use the existing potential. In this research, it has been determined that the problems, especially the security problem, have been largely eliminated. It has been determined that if perception management is well planned and managed, the security problem will disappear completely. It was concluded that the lack of cooperation between stakeholders, which is another problem, is an obstacle for the destination to use its potential. In fact, it is known that if the stakeholders cannot cooperate, it causes the success of the destination to be eliminated (Bornhorst et al., 2010: 588).

Another result, which is emphasized with importance, is that the destination of Van has an important potential in terms of tourism attractiveness elements, but that this potential has not been used effectively. This result is also an important result of previous studies on Van (Karaduman, 2019: 91). It can be seen that Van has low recognition in the Iraqi market and that Iraqis come to Van independently of any promotion, lobby or info tour. Van's prominent attractions are the Van Breakfast, Van Lake, Van Cat, Akdamar Island, Muradiye Waterfall and niello silver work. Attraction elements of destinations have an important role in the choice of destination (Buhalis, 2000: 97). In this context, it can be seen that the attractiveness factors contribute to the development and diversification of Van tourism related to the Iraqi market and create significant opportunities locally.

Another result is that Van is an affordable destination in terms of service provision, its climate and nature, the hospitality of the local people, and its cultural proximity and similarity with the Iraqi people, which all play a key role in the choice of the destination. In addition, language, lifestyles and religious situations, plus the fact that Iraqis who come to Van do not have difficulty in communicating, are their other strengths at this point.

An important result of the findings is that Van has a health tourism potential in terms of the Iraqi tourism market. In this case, it is thought that the inadequacy of Iraq's health infrastructure is a reason. This result supports a previous study on health tourism in Van (EADA, 2016). However, it is observed that commercialization tendencies are in the process of increasing, along with various socio-cultural changes brought about by tourism. It has been revealed that Iraqis can be encouraged into Van tourism due to the fact that the hospitals are well-equipped in medical terms in order to increase the number and sense of trust of Iraqis who come to Van for health tourism, and the health infrastructure is much better than in Iraq. In addition, further development of health institutions in Van, ensuring that the units act with a focus on health tourism, and the establishment of related offices in various regions in Iraq, are among the necessary and important issues for Van tourism.

The use of the Şırnak Habur Border Gate, Hakkari (Çukurca) Üzümlü Border Gate and Hakkari (Derecik) Umurlu Border Gate, which determine the arrival of Iraqis to Van, and the fulfillment of the requirements regarding the gates, reveal the changes in Van tourism. In addition, the Habur Border Gate is known as the gate most used by Iraqis entering Turkey (Becerem & Koç, 2016: 90). However, since there is no accurate data on how many Iraqis arrive in Van by way of the Habur Border Gate, it has been concluded that no comment can be made on the number of people coming into Turkey from Iraq by this means. However, it is possible to comment that all visitors who come to Turkey through the Üzümlü and Umurlu border gates, and who want to go to a city other than Hakkari by road, can stop by Van. Therefore, the distance between Van and the Habur Border Gate is considered to be an obstacle for visitors to come directly to Van. It has been concluded that the Üzümlü and Umurlu border gates are closer to Van than the Habur Border Gate. In addition, road and other infrastructure works, related to the Iraqi side of the Derecik Umurlu Border Gate, should be carried out. Although the number of people entering through the Çukurca Üzümlü Border Gate provides an opportunity to make an estimation in this regard, the numbers of those who enter through this border gate and who return to their country without leaving the Hakkari provincial border, the numbers who go to other provinces using the airport in the Yüksekova district, and the numbers who go to other provinces using Van as a transit route, make it difficult to make any accurate statement on this issue. The Üzümlü Border Gate is a strong alternative for the Van-Iraq connection that has been carried out using the Habur Border Gate for many years, as it is important in terms of shortening transportation times. However, it can be seen that this gate has not been preferred at the desired level yet due such reasons as the border gate not being available on a twenty-four hour basis, deficiencies in infrastructure, and the need for improvement on the roads between Çukurca and Van (such as the Güzeldere tunnels).

In terms of tourism infrastructure, it can be that the focus is on air transportation, based on the disadvantages of using the border gates. It can also be seen that the stakeholders still tend to keep the tourism potential alive, in terms of adding reciprocal flights and realizing affordable flights to improve Van tourism and increase its gains. Therefore, it is important to plan direct flights, primarily between Iraq and Van.

It has been determined that the steps taken by the relevant institutions and organizations for the Iranian market in Van were not taken for the Iraqi tourism market. The relevant stakeholders state that the marketing activities of Van local administrators for Iranian tourists are not sufficiently implemented for Iraqi tourists. Therefore, it can be pointed out that Van needs to revise its target market perception in destination management. It is possible for Van to be able to achieve the success of accepting visitors from different tourism markets of previous years, with the right promotion and planning. In addition, as the importance of tourism in terms of social, economic and cultural development is understood, it is thought that progress will be realized through the awareness levels of the public in Van.

When research on Iraq in the literature is examined, subjects such as Iraq's political relations with neighboring countries, commercial relations, and economic relations, the effects of political relations between neighboring countries on commercial relations have been studied (Dağ, 2020; Iraq Country Report, 2020; Yaşar, 2020; Köşker, 2017; Çakıcı et al., 2010). This research constitutes an important theoretical infrastructure at the point of opening Van as a destination to the Iraqi market, and covers how opportunities and challenges can be encountered in the process. Through this research, it is thought that Van will contribute to the literature in terms of its current situation and challenges/opportunities in terms of tourism markets due to its geographical location, climate, immigration from surrounding provinces, historical and cultural ties, and being open to cultural change.

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