

Iran to Form 'Bridge of Turquoise' for One Belt One Road

「一帶一路」 伊朗的新出路

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In April this year, I had the privilege of leading a group of some 20 Hong Kong executives and entrepreneurs to Iran on behalf of the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce. Our goal was to explore the sensational opportunities that have arisen for Hong Kong business as a result of the lifting of economic sanctions on Iran in January by the USA, the European Union and others. The Chamber's mission was, in fact, the first major business delegation from Hong Kong to Iran since that diplomatic break-through.

Iran has a highly educated, young and urbanized population of nearly 80 million – about the size of Turkey's. It is famous for having large oil and natural gas reserves; less well known is that it is a major player in the automotive, agricultural and pharmaceutical industries. Its stock market is about six times the size of that of Nigeria, Africa's largest economy. The country has more than 20,000 bank branches. It is one of the top 10 "tourism countries" in the world as measured by the number of UNESCO (United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture) heritage sites. Its reformist Government has set an annual growth target of eight per cent, and 800,000 young people are entering the work-force every year.

These key economic indicators point to the opening of a new frontier in Hong Kong's international business network. Few, if any such frontiers remain to be explored.

We visited the capital Tehran (with some 10 million inhabitants) and the major business and cultural centres of Mashhad and Isfahan. Both before and after our trip, I received numerous enquiries about the political, cultural and historical background of Iran from companies that are seriously interested in such an unusual opportunity, but for whom Iran has an aura of mystery, given its decades of isolation during the sanctions regime. I shall try to answer some of these queries from a personal perspective.

The historical context is crucial to any basic understanding of Iran. Iran is comparable to only two other countries – Egypt and China – in terms of its long history and ancient civilisation. Like China, its history has been characterized by periods of great national, and sometimes international strength, alternating with shorter periods of instability and foreign interference.

The Iranians are an Indo-European people, which means that modern Farsi is closer to English than to Arabic, although

it is written in a script similar to the latter (think of Chinese and Japanese). The Iranians moved from Central Asia into what is now Persia in the early first millennium BC, during the course of which they created what was at the time the world's largest political entity, the Achaemenid Empire, the borders of which stretched from the Balkans and North Africa to Northern India.

The transforming event in the history of Iran was its sudden and swift conquest by the Arabs in the first half of the seventh century. The Iranians had just been weakened by a long war with the Byzantine (late Roman) Empire, but what ensured their defeat was the vital new religion of Islam brought by the conquerors, who had been united politically and spiritually by the Prophet Muhammad. It was to be the fusion of Islam with the ancient culture of Persia that was to produce the unique features of modern Iran.

The height of this first Muslim Caliphate was reached after its capital was moved from Damascus to Baghdad in the eighth century. This is the period that Westerners associate with the "Thousand and One Nights" and Harun al-Rashid. Persian cultural influences became dominant among all classes within the Caliphate, especially in Iran itself.



By the beginning of the 16th century, a strong central Iranian authority had taken shape again in the form of the Safavid Empire. The Safavid Shahs consolidated the Iranian achievements over previous centuries, produced some of the world's most magnificent architecture and institutionalized Shi'a Islam, with its markedly sophisticated and mystical traits, as the official creed.

The 19th century saw a period of decline, as Western colonial powers competed for influence in what was even then recognised as the world's most crucial geopolitical bridge between east and west. In the 20th century, attempts were made by the short-lived Pahlavi dynasty to strengthen and modernise the country; but this was, at best, partially successful and was achieved at the expense of effectively making Iran into a client state of the US.

Discontent with this dependency among all sectors of society, coupled with increasing administrative corruption, came to a head in 1979, when the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to a hero's welcome. Unfortunately, the US showed no desire to relinquish its dominance (although it had also refused asylum to the deposed Shah) and anti-American sentiment in Iran clashed against increasingly anti-Iranian rhetoric in the West.



▲ Meeting with Dr Mojtaba Mousavian Director General of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade Promotion.
 ▲ 與伊朗工礦貿易部貿易促進組織亞太司總司長Dr Mojtaba Mousavian 博士會面。

Sanctions were imposed by the Western powers, which simply meant that those same countries were unable to take advantage of the opportunities that a positive relationship with Iran would have created, while ordinary Iranians were unable to realise the full potential of their country's geographical position, highly educated population, sophisticated culture and vast natural resources.

This simplified background is necessary to explain both the crucial importance of Iran being welcomed back into the international community and the strength and resilience of the Iranian Government and people.

Throughout the recent difficult years, China has taken a more enlightened attitude towards Iran than many other countries. As a result, following the easing



▲ Isfahan, Iran's cultural centre.
▲ 伊朗文化名城伊斯法罕。

of sanctions, Hong Kong's direct trade with Iran and its indirect trade through the Mainland can only grow exponentially; there could be no better time for Hong Kong businesses to investigate the opportunities on offer. Opportunities span the chemical industry, agriculture, aviation, finance, construction, hotels and tourism, mining, car manufacture, cultural exchange, electronics, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals (and, of course, carpets and caviar).

But it is important to move quickly. Italy's public rail company has signed already a US\$5 billion agreement to renovate and upgrade the local rail network. The Danish pharmaceutical leader Novo Nordisk is building a plant and doubling its local staff. Melia Hotels of Spain (together with Accor of France and Rotana of Saudi Arabia) are to open the first officially five-star hotel in Iran. The Singapore Business Federation organised a high-level, 57-member delegation in February. A US\$25 billion deal with Airbus made the international headlines. And so on.

Of course, problems remain. While taxation of foreign investment is being reduced, simplified free trade zones established and huge opportunities in infrastructure work opened up, a degree of cultural misunderstanding still prevails. New visitors may be surprised at the safe, clean, welcoming and

sophisticated environment – vastly different than the normal portrayal in the Western media – but the use of English is not widespread outside the capital. Internet and telecommunications standards have yet to meet Hong Kong expectations. Above all, lingering uncertainty about the continuing application of some sanctions by the US has made many banks reluctant to handle Iranian business while many businesses are uncertain whether trade with Iran will compromise their existing banking arrangements.

These concerns will take time to address in full. But there are some obvious steps that all companies seeking to trade or invest in Iran can take. In the first place, it is crucial to acquire reliable information. Few independent sources of reliable market information exist inside or outside Iran (London-based Arabia Monitor is an exception), so it is important to visit the country armed with the necessary introductions. We were very lucky in this regard, being on a mission for the Hong Kong General Chamber! Due diligence with respect to sanctions compliance is also an obvious but necessary step once you have formulated your preliminary business plan and have found a good local partner, which is essential for small medium enterprises and large corporations alike. And, of course, a clear plan for investing and repatriating your money is something that the continuing issues with

the international banking system makes important.

If this sounds daunting, then Hong Kong companies can be assured that they have, at least, a temporary advantage over many competitors, given the Chinese Government's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and Hong Kong's role in its implementation over the coming years. We have not only official support at every level, but also our existing Mainland networks. China has been the mainstay of Iran's foreign trade during its years of isolation from the West, and is now its largest trade partner with bilateral trade reaching US\$50 billion last year. With that come the less tangible benefits of cultural familiarity, and a record of interrupted business connections. On the other hand, the Mainland still lacks the sophistication of Hong Kong's legal, financial and professional systems. So Hong Kong entrepreneurs stand a good chance to leverage their unique position as friends of both Iran and China. As a cornerstone of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, Hong Kong is ready for business with Iran – the traditional "Bridge of Turquoise."*

*Editor's note: Reference is made here to Canadian photographer Roloff Beny's book "Persia: Bridge of Turquoise," which lets the reader see Iran through his camera's lens. Iran was an important link in the East-West trade route, given its strategic location as a bridge between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf.



年四月，我有幸率領約20位香港的企業家和公司高層，代表香港總商會訪問伊朗。美國、歐盟及其他國家在今年一月撤銷了對伊朗的經濟制裁，我們此行的目標，就是要到當地為香港尋找商機。香港總商會的這次訪問團，是伊朗外交取得突破後，香港第一個前往當地的主要商務代表團。

伊朗有近八千萬高學歷、年輕和在城市生活的人口，數目足以媲美土耳其。它以世上數一數二的石油和天然氣蘊藏量知名，卻少有人知道它在汽車製造業、農業和製藥業的地位舉足輕重。它的股票市場是非洲最大經濟體尼日利亞的六倍，它的國土內有過二萬家銀行分行。按聯合國教科文組織的世界遺產數量來計算，它位列全球

十大最值得觀光旅遊的國家。它的改革派政府訂下了每年百分之八的增長目標，每年有八十萬青年人投身勞動市場。

這些主要經濟指標，指出了香港國際貿易網絡的新機遇。要知道這種新機遇在世上已經所剩無幾了。

這次代表團參觀了伊朗首都德黑蘭(人口約有一千萬)和該國的商業和文化重鎮什哈德和伊斯法罕。我在旅程前後收到不少對伊朗情況的疑問。提問者來自對此難得機遇有濃厚興趣的企業，他們想知道伊朗的政治、文化和歷史背景，但伊朗從前受到制裁，被國際社會孤立數十年，所以伊朗在他們眼中總像披著神秘的面紗。以下我將從個人角度解答嘗試部份問題。

要了解伊朗，必須從歷史角度入手。伊朗的歷史和文化之久遠，唯有埃及和中國足以相提並論。伊朗的歷史頗似中國，國力長期保持強盛，有時甚至有顯著的國際影響力，而動盪和受外國干涉的時期則較短。

伊朗人源自印歐人種，他們的現代波斯語接近英語甚於阿拉伯語，但文字上則較接近後者(如中文字和日文字般類似)。伊朗人公元前一千年由中亞地區移居至現時的波斯地區，期間創立了當時最大的國家——阿契美尼德帝國，其國土由巴爾幹半島伸延至非洲北部到印度北部。

伊朗歷史的一大轉折在七世紀上半葉，阿拉伯人以迅雷不及掩耳的速度征服了伊朗。當時伊朗人早因與拜占庭帝國(晚期羅馬帝國)長期征戰而國力下滑，但真正打敗伊朗的是新興的伊斯蘭教。征服伊朗的阿拉伯人，政治和精神上都在先知穆罕默德的影響下團結一致，他們將伊斯蘭教傳入伊朗。伊斯蘭教於是與波斯的古老文化融合，成為了現代伊朗的獨特文化。

阿拉伯帝國的第一個高峰出現於八世紀，當時帝國首都由大馬士革遷至巴格達。歐洲人想像中的「一千零一夜」和哈倫·拉希德，正是這段時期的阿拉伯世界。這時期波斯文化影響了阿拉伯帝國的所有階層，對伊朗地區的影響尤深。

16世紀初開始，是以伊朗人為政權核心的薩法維帝國崛起。帝國的統治者整合了伊朗文明在前幾個世紀的成就，所建之城在世上最宏偉建築之列，並把什葉派伊斯蘭教及該教派的儀式納為國家信仰。

伊朗國力在19世紀下滑。當時伊朗地區是世界公認連接東西方的橋樑，其極具地緣政治價值，引來西方殖民勢力競相爭奪。20世紀，國祚短暫的巴列維王朝試圖振興國家，帶領國家走向現代化。然而這目標極其量只取得部份成效，更糟的是，成功的代價令伊朗成為了美國的附庸。

伊朗社會各個階層都不滿政府對美國的依賴，加上政府越見腐敗，終於在1979年，流亡海外的什葉派宗教學者何梅尼返回伊朗，獲英雄式歡迎，令伊朗局勢來到轉捩點。然而美國無意放棄它對伊朗的影響力(儘管它亦拒絕為被廢黜的伊朗國王提供庇護)，因此伊朗國內的反美情緒日增，同時西方社會也日益敵視伊朗。西方列強最終向伊朗施加制裁。結果，西方國家放棄了與伊朗建立正常關係所能收獲的利益，而伊朗的地理優勢、高教育水平的人口、優秀的文化和豐富的自然資源，也無用武之地。

各國何以歡迎伊朗重歸國際社會？伊朗政府和人民有何能力和韌性？上述伊朗的簡史是了解這些問題所必須具備的基礎知識。

中國近年熬過不少艱苦歲月，對伊朗的態度比很多國家開明得多。隨著國際社會放寬對伊朗的制裁，香港與伊朗的直接貿易，及通過中國大陸的間接貿易，定能迅速發展：現時正是香港商界到伊朗考察商機的最佳時機。具發展潛力的行業包括化工，農業，航空，金融，建築，酒店旅遊，採礦，汽車製造，文化交流，電子，電訊，製藥(當然還有地毯和魚子醬)。

然而我們必須迅速行動。意大利國家鐵路公司已於伊朗簽訂價值50億美元的協議，以翻新和改善當地的鐵路網。丹麥的製藥龍頭諾和諾德正在當地興建新廠，並要將當地僱員的數目提高一倍。由西班牙美利亞酒店集團、法國雅高酒店集團和沙特阿拉伯羅塔納酒店集團合營的五星級酒店快將正式營運。新加坡工商聯合總會在二月派出了代表團訪問當地，57位成員都是業界高層。飛機製造商空中巴士與伊朗簽訂的250億美元訂單也登上了國際新聞頭條。諸如此類的消息並不罕見。

當然，投資伊朗不可能一帆風順。伊朗政府降低了對海外投資者的徵稅，簡化稅制，設立了自由貿易區，並透過基建項目提供了大量商業機會。然而，文化差異而致的誤解依然存在。首次到訪伊朗的旅客或會訝異於當

地安全、潔淨、好客和優雅的環境，因為眼前的景象與西方媒體平時展示的實在大相逕庭。可是，英語在首都以外地方並不普及，互聯網和電訊服務也滿足不了及香港人的要求。而最重要的，還是美國對伊朗的一些制裁猶在，帶來揮之不去的不確定因素，令很多銀行拒絕處理與伊朗有關的業務——很多企業擔心一旦與伊朗貿易，會否影響與銀行既有的業務往來。

這些問題需要一定時間才能完全解決。但有意投資伊朗或與當地貿易的企業，還是可以執行一些部署。首先，最關鍵的是獲取可靠的消息。無論在伊朗國內還是國外，有關伊朗市場的獨立消息來源相當稀有(總部位於倫敦的Arabia Monitor是例外)。親身到伊朗走一趟非常重要，當然，還要找到合適的嚮導，這次香港總商會代表團在這方面的運氣可說不俗。若你已有投資伊朗的初步計劃，又找到好的當地夥伴，那你必須做好盡責調查的工作，確保一切符合現有制裁措施的規限，這對中小企和大企業都重要。當然，投資伊朗肯定要有與國際銀行體系長期協商的準備，而清晰的資本投資和調度計劃不可或缺。

上述情況聽來或令人氣餒，但香港企業可以放心，因為我們最少仍有一點短期優勢。相比其他競爭對手，香港未來可以背靠國家重點推廣的「一帶一路」策略來發展。香港的優勢在於有國家的全面支持，在內地亦建立了良好網絡。伊朗被國際社會孤立時，中國成為了伊朗外貿的支柱，現時更是伊朗最大的貿易夥伴，去年雙邊貿易總額達500億美元。中伊兩國文化頗有相似之處，加上從未間斷的商貿關係，無形中促進了兩國關係。另一方面，內地的法律、金融和專業業務尚未及得上香港，所以香港商界仍可發揮獨特功能，以作為中伊兩國的共同夥伴。憑著「一帶一路」策略，香港已做好準備，投資伊朗——自古連接東西方的「綠松石之橋*」。

*編者註：著者於此引用加拿大攝影師Roloff Beny之作品《Persia: Bridge of Turquoise》。該書以照片讓讀者一睹伊朗的真實景況。伊朗接壤裏海和波斯灣，處於東西方貿易路線的核心位置。

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