

GEOTOURISM AND AZERBAIJAN'S MILITARY-HISTORICAL HERITAGE: ASSESSMENT OF THE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE CAUCASUS ISLAMIC ARMY ROUTE

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Summary. Growing demand for historically meaningful and place-based experiences has increased interest in transforming underutilized military heritage landscapes into sustainable tourism resources. This study evaluates the development potential of the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route in Azerbaijan as an integrated military heritage, memorial tourism, and geotourism product. A mixed-methods approach combines field observations across historically significant territories, archival and documentary analysis, secondary tourism statistics, and evidence triangulation. The assessment is complemented by analogical comparison with established military heritage destinations in Gallipoli, Normandy, and Sakarya. Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model is applied to determine the route's current development stage and construct future development scenarios. The findings position the proposed route within the exploration and early involvement stages, characterized by limited tourism infrastructure, fragmented heritage interpretation, weak destination integration, and low international visibility. Scenario modeling projects approximately 30,000 visitors in the short term, 120,000 in the medium term, and 300,000 in the long term. The results indicate that coordinated infrastructure development, coherent historical interpretation, destination branding, and stakeholder cooperation could transform dispersed military heritage sites into an integrated tourism corridor, supporting heritage preservation, tourism diversification, regional economic activity, and more geographically balanced tourism development across Azerbaijan.

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1. Introduction

Heritage tourism has become an increasingly important component of destination development, particularly where historical and cultural resources can be transformed into sustainable tourism experiences that preserve collective memory while supporting local and regional development (Gordon, 2018). Within this context, military heritage—including battlefields, memorials, cemeteries, historic settlements, and other places associated with conflict and national memory—offers distinctive opportunities for developing integrated tourism routes that connect historical narratives with the landscapes in which these events occurred (Bończak, 2013; Miles, 2017). In Azerbaijan, the legacy of the Caucasian Islamic Army provides a strong basis for such an approach, as historically significant sites associated with its 1918 military operations are distributed across several regions and could be integrated into a coherent heritage route that strengthens historical interpretation, increases the visibility of underutilized destinations, and promotes more geographically balanced tourism development.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route across Azerbaijan, connecting key historical sites, military memorials, and Turkish martyrs' cemeteries associated with the Army's 1918 campaign within an integrated heritage tourism corridor.



Fig. 1. Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Tourism Route

Source: Authors's finding

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model provides a useful framework for assessing the development of emerging heritage routes through the stages of exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and potential decline or rejuvenation (Butler, 1980). Recent extensions emphasize that movement between these stages depends not only on visitor growth but also on institutional capacity, government intervention, infrastructure, conservation, and destination management (Kubickova & Martin, 2020). Empirical evidence further demonstrates that destination trajectories are not necessarily linear, as stagnation may be followed by decline or strategic rejuvenation depending on governance and investment (Kholis & Nugroho, 2023). Similarly, mature destinations may experience slower growth and structural adjustment while adopting diversification strategies to maintain competitiveness (Ramón-Cardona & Sánchez-Fernández, 2024). Accordingly, TALC offers both a conceptual basis for identifying the current position of an emerging military heritage route and a framework for developing alternative future scenarios.

2. Material and methods

The study adopts a mixed-methods tourism research design combining qualitative field observations, interviews with local residents, and secondary data analysis. It examines the historical and cultural heritage of the Caucasian Islamic Army in Azerbaijan and assesses its potential integration into a memorial-historical tourism route and transformation into an active tourism resource.

Official tourism statistics were obtained from the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SSCRA, 2025). Using purposive sampling, field observations were conducted across nine historically significant territories along the proposed route: Baku, Ganja, Yevlakh, Agdash, Goychay, Agsu, Shamakhi, Hajigabul, and Kurdamir. Observations documented the condition of historical sites, local oral narratives, interpretative resources, and relevant photographic evidence.

The analysis was complemented by archival documents, periodicals, scholarly publications, encyclopedic sources, and institutional reports selected according to thematic relevance and academic reliability. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, evidence from field observations, archival materials, and academic literature was systematically cross-validated through triangulation (Bans-Akutey, 2021).

To evaluate the tourism potential of the Caucasian Islamic Army (CIA) memorial-historical route, an analogical comparison was conducted with the Gallipoli Memorial Tourism Route, the Normandy Landing Tourism Route, and the Sakarya Battle Tourism Route. The comparison was based on the following criteria: geographical location and route structure, historical significance and symbolic value, tourism infrastructure and interpretation opportunities, as well as visitor flows and market orientation. This comparative analysis enabled the identification of the strengths of internationally successful memorial tourism routes and the assessment of their applicability to the proposed CIA route (Bird et al., 2016).

To assess the development prospects of the Caucasian Islamic Army memorial tourism route, scenario modelling was conducted based on Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model (Butler, 2008).

Within the framework of the study, the following formulas were used to forecast tourist flows associated with the CIA memorial tourism route. Forecasted Number of Tourists:

$$T = T_{max} \times k \quad (1)$$

where T represents the forecasted number of tourists, T_{max} denotes the maximum number of tourists that the region can accommodate, and k is the suitability coefficient. Forecasted Tourism Revenue:

$$R = T \times C_{avg} \quad (2)$$

where R denotes total tourism revenue, T represents the number of tourists, and C_{avg} is the average expenditure per tourist.

The suitability coefficient was determined using different percentage values corresponding to short-, medium-, and long-term development scenarios. Statistical data used for forecasting purposes were analyzed based on official sources, including the State Statistical Committee and the OECD (OECD, 2021; Song et al., 2013).

The integrated use of the selected methods was necessitated by the complexity of developing a memorial tourism route as a multifaceted tourism product. Each method employed in the study fulfilled a distinct analytical function:

- Field observations provided an assessment of the current conditions along the route traversed by the Caucasian Islamic Army;
- Archival and literature analyses established the historical foundations of the memorial tourism route;
- Analogical comparison enabled benchmarking against international best practices in memorial tourism route development;
- The TALC model facilitated the forecasting of the route's future development trajectory.

The integration of these methodological components contributed to a more comprehensive, reliable, and multidimensional interpretation of the research findings.

3. Results and discussion

The findings indicate that the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route has substantial historical, symbolic, and tourism potential, connecting dispersed military, memorial, and cultural sites into a distinctive heritage corridor across Azerbaijan. Field and archival evidence confirms the preservation of important tangible and intangible heritage, while comparison with Gallipoli, Normandy, and Sakarya highlights limitations in infrastructure, route integration, destination management, and international visibility. Nevertheless, the route's combination of urban and rural settlements, battlefields, mountainous landscapes, memorials, and cemeteries provides a strong foundation for integrated military, memorial, and heritage tourism development.

From the perspective of symbolic value and historical meaning, all four routes share common characteristics. Gallipoli, Normandy, Sakarya, and the Caucasian Islamic Army routes function as important sites of remembrance that embody narratives of sacrifice, resistance, and national identity. While the Normandy route possesses a distinctly global profile, the Gallipoli, Sakarya, and Caucasian Islamic Army routes primarily hold national and regional significance. The Caucasian Islamic Army route, in particular, represents a shared historical memory linking Azerbaijan and Türkiye and serves as a symbol of enduring historical solidarity between the two nations (Yeneroğlu Kutbay & Aykaç, 2016).

Compared with established international military heritage routes, the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route remains at an early development stage, characterized by limited visitor infrastructure, fragmented interpretation, weak destination integration, and low international visibility, particularly in regions with relatively modest tourism flows (Köylü, 2023). Nevertheless, its shared historical significance for Azerbaijan and Türkiye provides considerable potential to attract domestic, Turkish, and wider Turkic-world visitors.

The TALC assessment places the route within the **exploration and early involvement stages**, but indicates substantial growth potential under effective planning, investment, management, and marketing. Scenario projections suggest approximately **30,000 visitors in the short term, 120,000 in the medium term, and 300,000 in the long term**, highlighting the route's potential to develop into a significant military heritage tourism destination in Azerbaijan and the wider Turkic world.

Figure 2 illustrates the TALC-based development trajectory of selected military heritage tourism routes, positioning the Caucasian Islamic Army Route at an early stage, compared with the developing Sakarya, maturing Gallipoli, and near-stagnation Normandy routes.

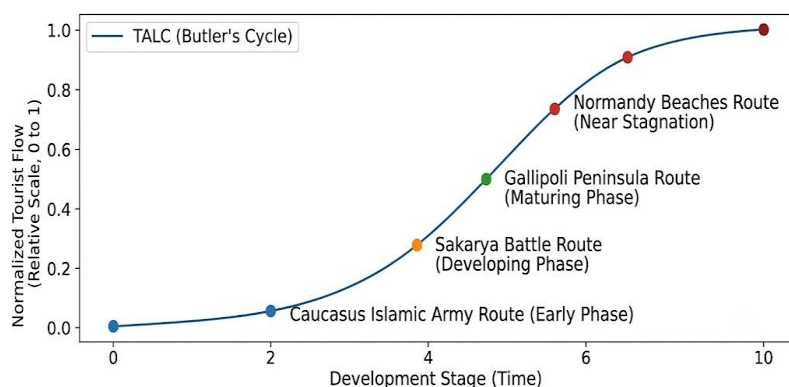


Fig. 2. Comparative Analysis of Tourism Routes According to the TALC Model

Source: Created by the authors in accordance with Butler's TALC model

Based on the TALC model, scenario-based forecasting was conducted to assess the potential future development of the proposed heritage tourism route. As illustrated in the figure, the Normandy Landing Route can be classified as being in the maturity stage, the Gallipoli Heritage Route has reached a consolidated stage of development, while the Sakarya Battlefields Route remains in the development stage of the tourism life cycle.

The forecasting results indicate substantial potential for increasing tourist arrivals and tourism revenues across all districts along the proposed route, including areas where tourism activity is currently limited. Systematic development of the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route could therefore diversify regional tourism, stimulate infrastructure investment, create employment, support local businesses, and strengthen heritage preservation. In this context, the route could serve as a catalyst for sustainable regional development by extending tourism-related economic and socio-cultural benefits to historically significant but underutilized destinations.

Figure 3 illustrates the TALC-based development trajectory of the proposed heritage route under low, medium, and high tourism scenarios, demonstrating how different development conditions may shape the growth of tourist flows over time.

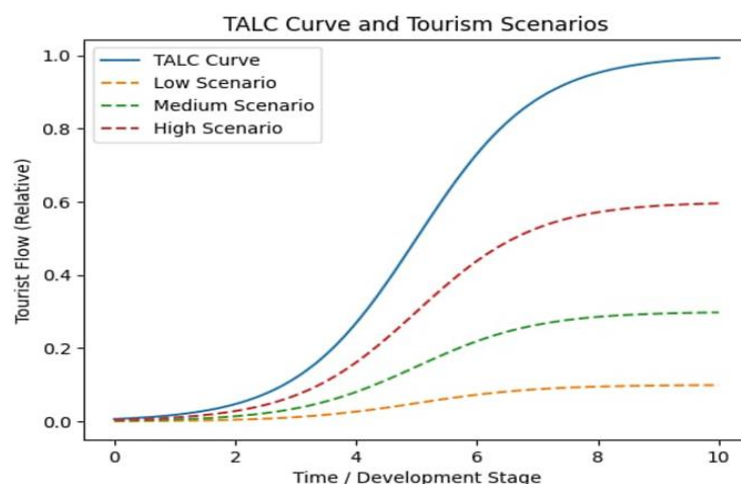


Fig. 3. Scenario-based modeling of the TALC trajectory

Source: Compiled by the author

To estimate the potential tourism demand for the proposed Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route, a comparative benchmarking approach was employed using established military heritage tourism destinations. Available tourism statistics indicate that the Gallipoli Heritage Route attracts approximately 2–4 million visitors annually, the Normandy Landing Route receives between 2 and 6 million visitors, and the Sakarya Battlefields Route attracts approximately 0.6–2 million visitors per year (Aliagaoglu, 2008). Based on average annual visitation figures reported in the literature, the Normandy route receives approximately 4 million visitors annually, the Gallipoli route around 2 million, and the Sakarya route approximately 600,000 visitors.

To establish a benchmark value for forecasting purposes, the average annual visitor number was calculated using the following formula:

$$T_{\max} = \frac{(T_1 + T_2 + \dots + T_n)}{n} \quad (1)$$

where $T_{\max}$ represents the benchmark average annual visitor level and T_1, T_2, T_n represent the annual visitor numbers of comparable military heritage routes. Based on this calculation and considering the characteristics of the selected benchmark destinations, an average reference value of approximately 2 million annual visitors was adopted for subsequent scenario modeling.

Drawing upon Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, development coefficients were assigned according to the anticipated stages of tourism evolution. Given that the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route represents a newly proposed tourism product characterized by limited infrastructure, low market recognition, and an early stage of destination development, conservative growth assumptions were applied. Accordingly, suitability coefficients of 1.5% for the short term, 6% for the medium term, and 15% for the long term were adopted (Butler, 2008).

The projected visitor numbers were calculated as follows:

- Short-term scenario:
2,000,000 x 1.5% = 30,000 visitors
- Medium-term scenario:
2,000,000 x 6% = 120,000 visitors
- Long-term scenario:
2,000,000 x 15% = 300,000 visitors

The forecasting results suggest that, under appropriate planning, infrastructure development, destination management, and marketing strategies, the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route could attract approximately 30,000 visitors in the short term, 120,000 visitors in the medium term, and up to 300,000 visitors in the long term. These projections indicate a substantial growth potential and support the feasibility of developing the route as a significant military heritage tourism destination within Azerbaijan and the broader Turkic world.

Table 1 presents the 2024 tourism indicators of the regions along the proposed route and estimates their short-medium and long-term potential for growth in tourist arrivals and tourism revenues under the scenario-based development framework.

Table 1

Regional Tourism Indicators and Scenario-Based Projections of Tourist Arrivals and Revenues along the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route

Region	2024 Tourist Arrivals (persons)	2024 Tourism Revenue (thousand AZN)	Per Capita Expenditure (AZN)	Short-Term Benefit	Medium-Term Benefit	Long-Term Benefit
Ganja	28,247	3,654.8	129.3	~58,000 / 7,482	~148,000 / 16,550	~328,000 / 42,410
Yevlakh	–	–	~30.00	~30,000 / 900	~120,000 / 3,600	~300,000 / 9,000
Aghdash	666	20.0	30.03	~31,000 / 930	~121,000 / 3,634	~301,000 / 9,039
Goychay	1,261	83.9	66.53	~31,000 / 2,062	~122,000 / 8,117	~302,000 / 20,092
Aghsu	553	31.6	57.14	~31,000 / 1,767	~121,000 / 6,897	~301,000 / 17,157
Shamakhy	49,064	7,119.6	145.10	~79,000 / 11,463	~170,000 / 24,667	~349,000 / 50,640
Hajigabul	–	–	~49.00	~31,000 / 1,519	~120,000 / 5,880	~300,000 / 14,700
Kurdamir	3,186	156.4	49.08	~33,000 / 1,619	~123,000 / 6,036	~303,000 / 14,871

Source: Authors' finding

As demonstrated in the forecast table, a minimum twofold increase in both tourist arrivals and tourism revenues is projected across all regions located along the route, including the Hajigabul and Yevlakh districts, which currently exhibit the lowest tourism indicators for 2024. These results suggest that even peripheral and less-developed destinations possess significant untapped tourism potential when integrated into a structured heritage route framework.

The relevance of military heritage in Azerbaijan should also be understood within the broader geopolitical context of the South Caucasus, where military and security dynamics have historically interacted with economic development, sovereignty, and national identity (Hasanov et al., 2025). From this perspective, the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route represents not merely a collection of historical military sites but a spatial expression of collective memory that can be interpreted and communicated through heritage tourism.

The findings show that the Caucasian Islamic Army Heritage Route has considerable potential as a military heritage tourism product, but its transition from the early TALC stage toward sustained development requires stronger infrastructure, spatial integration, destination branding, coherent historical storytelling, and coordinated management, consistent with evidence from Gallipoli, Normandy, Extremadura, and Kermanshah (Hosseini et al., 2024; Guerra et al., 2026). Nevertheless, limitations related to available statistical data, scenario-based forecasting, geographically restricted field observations, and the scarcity of route-specific literature indicate that future research should incorporate visitor surveys and broader primary data to refine demand estimates, understand tourist behaviour, and support the route's competitive and sustainable development.

4. Conclusion

The study confirms that the historical landscapes associated with the Caucasian Islamic Army possess strong prospects for becoming a distinctive heritage tourism network in Azerbaijan. Although many relevant sites remain insufficiently connected and promoted, their historical authenticity, symbolic importance, and geographical distribution provide a valuable foundation for route formation. The TALC assessment suggests that the initiative is still at an initial phase, meaning that its future progress will largely depend on coordinated management, improved accessibility, interpretative facilities, and targeted promotion. Comparative experience from established military destinations also indicates that successful development requires more than the preservation of individual monuments; historical locations should be linked through a clear narrative and common destination identity. Importantly, bringing lesser-visited districts into the route may distribute tourism benefits beyond established destinations and encourage local economic activity. Therefore, long-term success requires cooperation among public authorities, communities, tourism stakeholders, and heritage institutions while ensuring that commercial development remains consistent with historical authenticity and commemorative values.

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ГЕОТУРИЗМ И ВОЕННО-ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЕ НАСЛЕДИЕ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА: ОЦЕНКА ТУРИСТИЧЕСКОГО ПОТЕНЦИАЛА МАРШРУТА КАВКАЗСКОЙ ИСЛАМСКОЙ АРМИИ

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Резюме. Растущий спрос на туристский опыт, связанный с исторически значимыми событиями и конкретными территориями, усилил интерес к преобразованию недостаточно используемых ландшафтов военно-исторического наследия в ресурсы устойчивого туризма. В исследовании оценивается потенциал развития Маршрута наследия Кавказской исламской армии в Азербайджане как интегрированного туристского продукта, объединяющего военно-историческое наследие, мемориальный туризм и геотуризм. Смешанный методологический подход сочетает полевые наблюдения на исторически значимых территориях, анализ архивных и документальных материалов, вторичные статистические данные о туризме и триангуляцию доказательств из различных источников. Оценка дополняется сравнением по аналогии с известными дестинациями военно-исторического туризма в Галлиполи, Нормандии и Сакарье. Для определения текущей стадии развития маршрута и построения сценариев его дальнейшего развития применяется модель жизненного цикла туристской территории Батлера (Tourism Area Life Cycle – TALC). Результаты позволяют отнести предлагаемый маршрут к стадиям исследования и начального вовлечения, характеризующимся ограниченностью туристской инфраструктуры, фрагментарностью интерпретации исторического наследия, слабой интеграцией туристских дестинаций и низкой международной узнаваемостью. Сценарное моделирование прогнозирует приблизительно 30 000 посетителей в краткосрочной перспективе, 120 000 — в среднесрочной и 300 000 — в долгосрочной перспективе. Полученные результаты показывают, что согласованное развитие инфраструктуры, последовательная и системная интерпретация исторического наследия, брендинг туристской дестинации и сотрудничество заинтересованных сторон способны преобразовать территориально разрозненные объекты военно-исторического наследия в единый туристский коридор. Это может способствовать сохранению историко-культурного наследия, диверсификации туристских продуктов, активизации региональной экономической деятельности и более сбалансированному в географическом отношении развитию туризма в Азербайджане.

Ключевые слова: геотуризм; туризм военного наследия; жизненный цикл туристической территории (TALC); маршруты наследия; мемориальный туризм; Азербайджан

GEOTURİZM VƏ AZƏRBAYCANIN HƏRBİ-TARİXİ İRSİ: QAFQAZ İSLAM ORDUSUNUN HƏRƏKƏT MARŞRUTUNUN TURİZM POTENSİALININ QIYMƏTLƏNDİRİLMƏSİ

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Xülasə. Tarixi əhəmiyyət daşıyan və konkret məkanlarla əlaqəli turizm təcrübələrinə artan tələbat kifayət qədər istifadə olunmayan hərbi irs landşaftlarının dayanıqlı turizm resurslarına çevrilməsinə marağı gücləndirmişdir. Tədqiqatda Azərbaycanda Qafqaz İslam Ordusunun İrs Marşrutunun hərbi irs, memorial turizm və geoturizmi birləşdirən inteqrasiya olunmuş turizm məhsulu kimi inkişaf potensialı qiymətləndirilir. Qarışıq metodoloji yanaşma tarixi əhəmiyyətli ərazilərdə aparılmış sahə müşahidələrini, arxiv və sənəddi materialların təhlilini, ikinci dərəcəli turizm statistikasını məlumatlarını və müxtəlif mənbələrdən əldə edilmiş sübutların trianquyasını birləşdirir. Qiymətləndirmə Gelibolu, Normandiya və Sakaryada formalaşmış hərbi irs turizmi destinasiyaları ilə

analoji müqayisə əsasında tamamlanır. Marşrutun mövcud inkişaf mərhələsini müəyyənləşdirmək və gələcək inkişaf ssenarilərini formalaşdırmaq üçün Batlerin Turizm Ərazisinin Həyat Dövrü (Tourism Area Life Cycle – TALC) modeli tətbiq edilmişdir. Nəticələr təklif olunan marşrutun turizm infrastrukturunun məhdudluğu, irsin interpretasiyasının parçalanmış xarakteri, turizm destinasiyalarının zəif integrasiyası və beynəlxalq səviyyədə tanınma dərəcəsinin aşağı olması ilə səciyyələnən kəşfiyyat və ilkin iştirak mərhələlərində olduğunu göstərir. Ssenari modelləşdirilməsi qısamüddətli perspektivdə təxminən 30 000, ortamüddətli perspektivdə 120 000 və uzunmüddətli perspektivdə 300 000 ziyarətçi proqnozlaşdırır. Nəticələr göstərir ki, infrastrukturun əlaqələndirilmiş inkişafı, tarixi irsin ardıcıl və sistemli interpretasiyası, turizm destinasiyasının brendləşdirilməsi və maraqlı tərəflər arasında əməkdaşlıq müxtəlif ərazilərdə yerləşən hərbi irs obyektlərini vahid turizm dəhlizinə çevirə bilər. Bu isə tarixi-mədəni irsin qorunmasına, turizm məhsullarının şaxələndirilməsinə, regional iqtisadi fəallığın artırılmasına və Azərbaycanda turizmin coğrafi baxımdan daha balanslı inkişafına töhfə verə bilər.

Açar sözlər: geoturizm; hərbi irs turizmi; Turizm Ərazisinin Həyat Dövrü (TALC); irs marşrutları; memorial turizm; Azərbaycan