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An Analysis of Challenges and Limitations in Cultural Diplomacy between Iran and Iraq from 2003 to 2024

* Khalil Sardarnia¹, Qahtan Adnan Abdolhosein Shobar², Jamil Ghoreyshi³

1. Professor in Political Science, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Shiraz, Shiraz, Iran

2. M.A Graduated in Political Science, University of Shiraz, Shiraz, Iran

3. PhD candidate in Political Science, University of Shiraz, Shiraz, Iran

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Abstract

Introduction: With the collapse of the imperial system and the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the emergence of a government based on religious ideology in 1979, the country's domestic policy and, consequently, foreign policy entered a new chapter. By examining the principles of Iran's foreign policy, it is observed that one of its important principles; Mutual peaceful relations with non-warring states and the revival of the idea of the Islamic Ummah, but the implementation and operation of these principles, at least in the case of the neighboring country, Iraq, despite the rule of Saddam and the Baath Party, was not only not possible, but also led to an eight-year war between the two neighboring countries with its hostile behavior and ambitious policies, because during this period, in addition to previous differences, the ideological differences of the existing regimes, the Baath regime's double pan-Arabist tenden-

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Seyyed Mahdi Sadatinejad, Ph.D.

Address: Professor in Political Science, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Shiraz, Shiraz, Iran

E-mail: kh_sardarnia@yahoo.com

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cies and its desire to rule the Arab world, as well as the tendencies of the two countries towards the opposite poles of the Cold War era and Iraq's opposition to Iranian rule over the three islands, made the conditions unfavorable. However, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 was a turning point in the history of Iraq's foreign relations and led to the reform of Iraq's unusual relations with its neighbors and the beginning of a new chapter of regional cooperation and peace.

The Iranian government, has used its capacity and connections with various Shia groups in Iraq, including the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces, to increase its influence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam in order to increase its soft power in various areas of Iraq. In this regard, Iran's interactions with Shia groups and activists expanded in the cultural, political, and social agenda and influence on the Shia nation and classes, economic aid, and services to further advance and influence cultural diplomacy. However, at some points, these relations and cultural diplomacy faced obstacles such as; lack of support for the Muqtada al-Sadr group and its rift with Shiites and other Shiite groups, political and intellectual rifts in Iraqi society, and interruptions by international countries and Saudi Arabia's abuse of these rifts. With these explanations, in this study, the authors seek to examine the most important challenges and obstacles to cultural diplomacy between Iran and Iraq in the post-Saddam period from 2003 to 2024.

Methods: One of the principles of Iran's foreign policy is to establish peaceful mutual relations with non-warring states and revive the idea of the Islamic Ummah. With the overthrow of Saddam, a new chapter in the foreign relations of Iran and Iraq emerged, but along with the opportunities that emerged in the relations between the two countries, we have witnessed challenges and limitations; consequently, the question of this article is what were the most important challenges and limitations of cultural diplomacy between Iran and Iraq after Saddam from 2003 to 2024? This research was conducted using an analytical-descriptive method with a historical sociological approach to international relations and using library, internet and document techniques.

This research uses the theoretical framework of neorealism. Another important debate in neorealism is on what basis the structure is formed and on what basis the actors of the international system adopt a specific arrangement.

Findings: The findings of this study showed that Iran has attempted to create a suitable atmosphere for cultural diplomacy and improving relations between the two nations by using a comprehensive discourse of historical relations with Iraqi Arabs in general and with Shiites in particular, based on cultural

and religious commonalities and an approach based on resistance to the expansion and hegemony of trans-regional powers, of course, with the cooperation of the Iraqi government. However, there have been challenges and obstacles to cultural diplomacy between Iran and Iraq from 2003 to 2024, the most important of which are: the negative activities and role of the American-Saudi media centered on Iran phobia in the region, the destructive activities and actions of Takfiri terrorist groups, especially ISIS, the formation and political-intellectual gaps between Shiite organizations, especially the Sadr Group, and the rest of the Shiites, Shia phobia in the region within the framework of geocultural competitions between the Shiite Crescent led by Iran and the Sunni bloc led by Saudi Arabia, the activity of anti-Iranian currents in Iraq and the remnants of the Baath Party, foreign interventions in Iraqi affairs to weaken the government, the continuation of some psychological effects resulting from the effects and consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, the lack of serious efforts by the two countries to expand cultural diplomacy to Sunni followers, and the lack of a long-term horizon for cooperation between the two countries.

Results and Discussion: Iran has had a large presence in Iraq since the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, and in the current situation, Iran is the most influential regional actor in the new Iraqi era. This historic opportunity encouraged Iran to fully support the new Iraqi government, despite the lack of support, failure to help improve the country's security situation, and even the prevention of the new Iraqi government by most regional countries. In this path, Iran mobilized a high degree of power and cooperation, especially in the fight against ISIS, to support the new Iraq and create stability and security in the country. In recent years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has provided economic assistance and comprehensive political and cultural support to the new Iraq, and given the deep relations it has established with various Iraqi ethnic groups, including Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds in the Kurdistan Region, it enjoys a suitable sphere of influence in Iraqi territory.

Despite Iran's military might and successful presence in Iraq, Iran appears to have faced challenges and limitations in its cultural diplomacy efforts. The tense geopolitical environment and the internal constraints of both countries, stemming from conflicts and nationalist views, have hampered its maneuverability in promoting cultural influence. Shia-Sunni rivalry in the Middle East and the conflict between Islam and the West have further complicated the situation. In addition, Iran's economic problems have prevented the country from investing adequately in cultural diplomacy compared to its competitors. As a result, Iran has not been able to achieve its full potential and has experienced setbacks in

expanding its cultural influence beyond Shia communities. Non-Persian-speaking countries in the region have been more influenced by Western powers, while Iran's international standing has fluctuated somewhat due to the resurgence of tensions. As a result, Iran lacks deep international and regional acceptance and faces pressure from rivals to isolate it on the world stage and in Iraq.

Key words: Challenges, Cultural diplomacy, Foreign policy, Iran, Iraq.