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Media Development and Foreign Policy: A Look at Strategies to Promote Iraq's Media Diplomacy

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Extended Abstract

In the complex and pluralistic landscape of 21st-century international relations, media diplomacy has emerged as a foundational pillar and strategic instrument of foreign policy. This phenomenon, which in essence signifies the intelligent and targeted use of communication tools to manage a nation's image and advance its national objectives on the global stage, is recognized as the primary arm for exercising soft power. In a world where public opinion plays a decisive role in legitimizing government policies, a country's ability to narrate its own story, articulate its positions, and influence global perceptions has become a vital component of national power. Global media giants such as the BBC, Voice of America, Reuters, and the Associated Press are not merely news organizations; they function as diplomatic instruments that

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can shape the global agenda and serve the interests of their home countries by framing events and highlighting specific issues. This reciprocal and synergistic relationship between politicians and the media is an undeniable reality; politicians need the media to convey their messages and mobilize public support, while the media depends on political elites for access to primary news sources and firsthand analysis.

Following the fundamental transformations of 2003 and the collapse of the Ba'athist regime, Iraq faced an existential challenge in the international arena: the challenge of rebuilding its national image. To establish its position as an independent and effective actor in the region and the world, the new Iraq requires an active and dynamic presence in the global communication sphere. However, the central problem this research addresses is the country's structural inability to effectively leverage media diplomacy. The roots of this failure are deep and multifaceted. On one hand, the legacy of decades of despotic Ba'ath party rule, which suppressed any growth of independent and professional media, has resulted in a historical vacuum and backwardness in Iraq's media infrastructure. On the other hand, post-2003, the country has faced not only internal reconstruction challenges but also a continuous and negative media onslaught from some regional and Western networks, particularly American-Saudi media, which have further weakened its standing in global public opinion by presenting a stereotypical, distorted, and one-sided image of Iraq as an insecure, unstable, and sectarian-ridden nation. This situation has turned the necessity of formulating scientific and practical strategies for enhancing Iraq's media diplomacy into an undeniable strategic priority.

Despite the critical importance of the subject, a review of the existing literature reveals a significant gap in academic work related to Iraq's media diplomacy, which itself confirms the underdevelopment of this field in both practice and theory. Nevertheless, the few studies that have been conducted illuminate various dimensions of this challenge. For instance, previous research has emphasized the key role of media in the post-ISIS peace-building process while also analyzing its function in Iraq's internal conflicts and crises. Other researchers have identified the structural and political obstacles hindering the emergence of independent media and have scrutinized the initial media dynamics follow-

ing the fall of Saddam Hussein. The consensus from all this research points to one key commonality: the absence of a professional, independent, and capable media infrastructure is the primary and fundamental obstacle to Iraq playing a significant role in global diplomacy, and resolving this dilemma requires specific and operational solutions.

To achieve this goal, a deep exploration of the perspectives and experiences of elites was undertaken using a qualitative approach and the research method of thematic analysis. Accordingly, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty prominent experts, including veteran Iraqi diplomats, professors and specialists in communication sciences, and leading media activists. The selection of this purposive sample was aimed at gathering the collective wisdom of an elite group directly involved with Iraq's foreign policy and media challenges. To ensure the scientific validity and reliability of the findings, the technique of researcher triangulation was employed, where the initial coding and analysis process was reviewed by a team of distinguished communication professors, ensuring the final analytical framework was agreed upon with high precision.

The rich findings from these interviews revealed three primary and interconnected strategies for advancing Iraq's media diplomacy: producing desirable media content, adopting a desirable media strategy, and maintaining a media focus on major foreign policy issues. Among these, the production of professional and engaging content was identified as the cornerstone of any successful endeavor. According to the experts, desirable content must prioritize the maximum use of digital technologies and modern communication platforms to bypass traditional media filters and establish direct and effective communication with global audiences. Furthermore, the produced messages must adhere to global journalistic standards; that is, they must be clear, concise, accurate, reliable, and as impartial as possible to break down barriers of distrust and be heard in the competitive global information environment. Objectivity in covering events, precise and non-exaggerated descriptions, and presenting balanced views on controversial topics are necessary conditions for gaining and maintaining international credibility.

Beyond mere news reporting, the power of effective storytelling is a funda-

mental axis. This approach means shifting from a defensive and reactive stance to an active and innovative one in narrative construction. Instead of simply responding to the negative narratives of others, Iraq must create its own alternative and compelling narrative, built upon the vast cultural, civilizational, and historical capacities of its land. Highlighting the heritage of Mesopotamia, showcasing contemporary artistic and cultural achievements, focusing on success stories of reconstruction and peaceful coexistence, and utilizing the powerful tools of art can be the building blocks of this new narrative. Presenting a realistic image that acknowledges challenges while focusing on opportunities and positive prospects, alongside efforts to create a unified and coherent narrative from all government institutions, will prevent sending contradictory messages and project an image of a stable state. Increasing diversity in the form and content of messages to engage various audience segments and focusing on the positive aspects of Iraq's historical relations with other nations will significantly strengthen the country's content strategy.

In today's world, media diplomacy for a country in Iraq's position is not an option or a ceremonial tool, but a vital necessity and a guarantor of survival and progress in the international arena. Foreign policy without the backing of a powerful media that can explain its positions, defend its interests, and manage its image is highly inefficient and lacks influence. For Iraq to make its independent voice heard by the world, neutralize the biased and toxic narratives of its rivals, and reclaim its true position as a key player in the region and the world, it has no choice but to make a serious and long-term investment in rebuilding and developing its media system. This requires allocating resources, training specialized human capital, creating coordination between diplomatic and media institutions, and learning from successful global experiences. An intelligent and effective media presence can dramatically increase a country's diplomatic weight and influence in global affairs. Therefore, enhancing media diplomacy must be placed on the agenda of Iraqi policymakers as a grand national project, so that the country can not only correct its distorted past image but also play an active, constructive, and leading role in resolving future crises and shaping a more stable future for its people and the region.

Key words: media diplomacy, foreign policy, Iraq, Iraqi media system, content analysis, soft power.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.