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## **A Comparative Study of Iranian and Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq (2003 - 2020)**

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**Parisa Pourali<sup>1</sup>, Mohammadreza Dehshiri<sup>2\*</sup>, Mohammadreza Ghaedi<sup>3</sup>, Hassan Khodaverdi<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>PhD candidate in International Relations, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Kish International Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kish Island, Iran

<sup>2\*</sup>Professor of Political Science, School of International Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup>Department of Political Science, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

<sup>4</sup>Department of Political Science & International Relations, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this study is to conduct comparative review of Iran and Turkey's cultural diplomacy in Iraq after the US invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Iran and Turkey, as two influential powers in the developments of the Middle East, are trying to advance their cultural diplomacy in Iraq according to the nature of their government, goals, and aspirations. The main question of the research is, "On what approach are the effectiveness factors of Iranian and Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq between 2003 and 2020 based?" The hypothesis is that Iranian cultural diplomacy in Iraq after 2003 has been following Shi'ism, the axis of resistance, and Iranianism<sup>1</sup> as the cornerstones of its approach, as opposed to Turkish cultural diplomacy that is based on Turkish nationalism and neo-Ottomanism. Accordingly, each of these governments is trying to exert influence in Iraq using soft power and cultural diplomacy. In doing this, Iran and Turkey have different conditions, opportunities, threats, and tools to advance their cultural diplomacy. The research findings indicate that Iran is in a better position than Turkey in terms of conditions, opportunities and tools but the focus on Shiism and the issue of resistance in Iraq has led to little attention paid to other features of cultural diplomacy. In contrast, Turkey, with its benefit-oriented and opportunistic approach, has been able to make the most of tools such as Kurdish language and literature, media diplomacy, tourism development, scientific and educational topics, etc. through careful planning and has gained more influence in Iraq. The method of data analysis is descriptive-analytical and the data collection was carried out via library research.

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\*Corresponding Author's Email: [m.dehshiri@sir.ac.ir](mailto:m.dehshiri@sir.ac.ir)

1. Ērānšāhri

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### Introduction

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath have certainly marked the most important event in Western Asia since the end of Cold War. Iraq, as the first Arab country to fall in American hands in 2003, shortly turned into the hub of regional clashes between actors with conflicting interests and approaches. Washington's entrance to the region and the Greater Middle East plan created new worries and concerns for many regional powers, especially Iran and Turkey. As further developments transpired in Iraq, transformation of the sphere of politics and governance and the emergence of a new government in which, unlike the pattern of the past few decades during which Sunni Arabs controlled the governments, the Shi'is and Kurds played a particular role was the beginning of a new age of collaboration, interaction, and confrontation with various actors and penetration of different powers in the country. Undoubtedly, in the years after 2003, Iraq turned into the most important neighbor for Iran when it came to foreign policy; on the one hand, the security importance of the country led Iran to always watch the actions of the Iraqi government extra carefully. On the other hand, Iraq is important to Iran from a cultural and identity point of view due to a majority Shi'i population and the existence of holy Shi'i sites in the country. After 2003, Iraq, in addition to having influential cultural bonds with Iran, became a hub through which Iran was able to deepen its strategic power in the Western Asia region. Iraq became increasingly important as a connection between Tehran and Da-

mascus after the Syrian Crisis began in 2011.

Unlike Iran that enjoyed the proper environment to enter Iraq and gain a presence, the Turkish government was greatly concerned about the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish government in Northern Iraq, which they described as a haven for chaos in the region and PKK activity (Kurdistan Worker's Party). In spite of the initial concerns, Ankara decided to take a political turn and choose trading and soft power as their approach in dealing with the autonomous Kurdistan region after when the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) took power. Overall, Iraq was put on Iranian and Turkish diplomatic radars after 2003, and both countries initiated different levels of relations with Baghdad and Erbil. Amongst different methods, one that has received increasing attention from Iran and Turkey to strengthen their influence on Iraq is soft power or cultural diplomacy. Yet the approach these countries have taken in advancing their cultural diplomacy programs in Iraq has received little scholarly attention to this day. To this aim, the current study asks, "On what approach are the effectiveness factors of Iranian and Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq between 2003 and 2020 based?" The hypothesis is that Iranian cultural diplomacy in Iraq after 2003 has been following Shi'ism, the axis of resistance, and Iranianism as the cornerstones of its approach, as opposed to Turkish cultural diplomacy that is based on Turkish nationalism and neo-Ottomanism. The current study uses a comparative lens and analyzes this issue through a descriptive-analytical approach.

The data collection was done through library research.

### **The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Foreign Policy**

Cultural diplomacy in addition to media diplomacy are part of public diplomacy and they are used along with overlapping concepts including, and specially, public diplomacy itself, international cultural relations, and advertisements; although there is a component of public diplomacy, they are not equivalent to it. Public diplomacy generally includes carry out of educational, cultural, and relational programs by a supportive government to influence the public opinion of the target country and push the politicians in the target country to make decisions according to the supportive country's foreign policy goals through due to pressure of public opinion. Cultural diplomacy is using a government's culture in supporting their foreign policy and diplomatic goals and building connections with external audiences to leave a good impression on them (Basiri & Khansari Fard, 2016, p. 81). Accordingly, what is meant by cultural diplomacy is trying to understand, educate, incorporate, and influence people's culture in other countries. Cultural diplomacy is, in essence, securing national interests through cultural means.

Cultural diplomacy is a prime example of soft power and gives countries the ability to infiltrate the other side and persuade them to cooperate through elements like culture, values, and ideas (Hasankhani, 2005, p. 137). The arena of international relations is strongly influenced by cultural and identity-related factors. Therefore, gaining an international status and prestige and influencing the public opinion, in other words, accessing soft power, is one of countries' most im-

portant diplomatic objectives when it comes to international politics. This important matter is pursued through different methods and mechanisms based on situation, status, facilities, opportunities, and cultural capacities in every country (Khorasani, 2008, p. 112). Soft power in the form of public diplomacy bears the responsibility of legitimizing the order that countries desire. Soft power in the form of cultural diplomacy gives meaning to certain realities or creates new realities through official governmental and non-governmental channels. In this model, diplomacy takes on the task of legitimizing the models that are created or creating new models of behavior through cognitive processes. Cultural diplomacy implicitly recognizes the mutual relationship between peoples and the global cohabitation that is part of international relations, hence helping to create or legitimize these novel models (Ghasemi, 2010, p. 24).

In cultural diplomacy, there is an attempt to present a nation's culture to the world, and therefore there is some sort of attempt to influence the opinions of the public, institutions, and organizations. The main tools of this type of diplomacy include language education, educational exchanges, and other types of direct cultural connections (Basiri & Khansari Fard, 2016, p. 81). More precisely, the media, tourism, academic/university means, published works including books, and sports instruments can be listed as some of the most important tools in this area (Araghi, 1394: 159). A successful cultural diplomacy program must carry out cultural policies as follows: 1- Establishing cultural centers connected to the Global Information Network (GIN) for the target countries, 2- publishing numerous books and journals in different languages (both online and printed), 3- establishing a vast in-

frastructure for connecting its own thinkers and students with their peers in the target country, 4- connecting with cultural leaders through GIN and exchanging cultural committees, 5- holding arts and cultural product exhibitions (e.g. film festival), 6- creating a wide range of online and information-based connections with governmental and non-governmental organizations, 7- connecting with the media in the target country in the form of media diplomacy and cyber diplomacy (Amini & Alamdari, 2012, p. 405). Countries use these tools to pursue their goals. Among a country's objectives for pursuing cultural diplomacy in other countries is preparing the youth and the bright minds of their country to speak another country's language, understand their culture and literature, and in other words, set the stage for understanding and appreciation of statements and images presented by mass media in countries who carry an advanced level of culture, language, and literature (Kharazi Mohammadvandi, 2009, p. 109). This can help a country exert influence and pursue its national objectives. Keeping this mind, we can now turn to a comparison of Iranian and Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq.

#### **IRANIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN IRAQ**

Iranian cultural diplomacy in Iraq can be discussed "towards Iraqi Kurds" and "towards other Iraqis". We will first address this issue regarding Iraqi Kurds.

#### **Iranian Cultural Diplomacy towards Iraqi Kurds**

Iranian cultural diplomacy towards Kurds includes many components: two of the most important ones are discussed here.

#### ***Iranians' Diplomacy towards the Kurds***

The existence of historical bonds between Iran and Iraq has a significant effect on the political and diplomatic relations of the two countries, but at the same time has a positive effect on the extent to which Iran holds soft power in Iraq. The common historical roots and traces of the Iranian civilization, culture, and society in Iraq brings the Iraqi people and officials closer to us. Thus, historically, there is much in common between Iranians and Iraqi Kurds. In *Contributions to the Anthropology of Iran*, Henry Field writes, "Kurds are Iranian in terms of language and physique, and as a branch of the Iranian race, they have much in common with other Iranians in terms of language, manners, habits, and lifestyle" (Field, 1964, p. 54). Apart from long-lasting historical and cultural similarities between Iranians and Iraqi Kurds (e.g., myths and rituals like Nowruz), the contemporary governments in Iran have had a good relationship with Iraqi Kurds. Accordingly, in terms of cultural diplomacy, the role played by the institutions connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who holds significant power in Iraq and the Kurdistan region of Iraq, is a prominent one.

Iran is active in different cities of the autonomous Kurdistan region through representative offices set up through the base of Ramadan. The main goals of these offices include:

- 1- Arranging relations between Kurdish and Iranian parties,
- 2- Working harder against Iranian opposition,
- 3- Learning about domestic circumstances in Iraq,
- 4- Learning about foreign or civil institutions and foreign activities in the Kurdistan region,

5- Philanthropic activities to attract public opinion (Mohammadpour, 2004, p. 97), and most importantly

6- Expanding Iranian cultural diplomacy in the Kurdistan region.

Overall, it is based on the intellectual mindset of Iranianism that the shared identity roots lead to expansion of mutual relationships and pursuit of a range of efforts to secure the satisfaction of other side's cultural interests; Iran's support for the Kurds happens in a cultural frame. Therefore, it can be claimed that cultural relations between Iran and the Kurds, especially the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, during the past few decades has had a serious effect on the political equations of both the Kurdistan region and Iraq as a whole. Iran has traditionally backed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Nikfar et al., 2018, p. 91).

#### ***Artistic, Social, and Media Diplomacy towards the Kurds***

The most important aspect of Iranian cultural diplomacy towards the Iraqi Kurdistan from an Iranians' point of view must be understood in the context of truly influential artistic (music and cinema), touristic (especially medical tourism), and social relations. Accordingly, the Iraqi Kurdistan has always been paid attention to by the officials of the Islamic Republic due to our historical, cultural, and linguistic bonds and similarities. The Islamic Republic has initiated relations with the autonomous region and opened consulates in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, and the Kurdistan region has also opened representative offices in Tehran and border cities (Danilovich, 2017, p. 93).

Every year, more than 3 million people travel between the two countries for pilgrimage, tourism, and medical care, a large number of whom are Kurdish (Bouzhmehrani & Pour

Eslami, 2014, p. 96). Academic exchanges, joint seminars, and student interactions are also very important to both sides and are emphasized by the Islamic Republic's cultural diplomacy program. In addition, setting up conferences and seminars in the Iraqi Kurdistan to commemorate famous Iranian Kurd figures can attract a lot of attention. Holding ongoing literary, artistic, and cultural contests in the Iraqi Kurdistan and helping with the participation of Iranian Kurd artists in their annual events can also facilitate the cultural relations between the two sides (Bouzhmehrani & Pour Eslami, 2014, p. 97). Nonetheless, there are hundreds of cultural and components that can be extracted from the relationship of Iran and the autonomous Kurdistan region.

#### ***Iranian Cultural Diplomacy towards Shi'i and Sunni Arabs in Iraq***

Another important aspect of Iranian cultural diplomacy in Iraq, is about its non-Kurdish, or Arabic, regions. Shi'ism is the most powerful leverage Iran has to play and role and be influential in Iraqi affairs. Being aware of the 60 percent Shi'i population of Iraq, Iran is willing to use this card through relations that have been built between Iran and the Iraqi Shi'is (Maleki & Azghandi, 2011, p. 126).

#### ***Cultural Diplomacy through Promotion of the Persian Language***

Similar to the relationship with the Kurds, Persian language is a main bond in the cultural diplomacy between Iran and Iraq, even in the Arabic regions (Beiki, 2010, p. 239). In the south of Iraq, there is a group of Persian-speaking Shi'i Iraqis who have stable relations with Iran; these relationships have not been challenged yet (Maar, 2001, p. 31). A large population of Iraqi teenagers and

youth have been leaning Farsi and have replaced it with English as their second language (Sanaei & Abdollahpour, 2009, p. 177). Moreover, one of the distinguishing features of the Najaf seminary is that its language of instruction is Persian since most of its students come from Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, and are completely fluent in Farsi (Parsapour, 2010, p. 53). The Persian language is considered the main communication tool in the cultural diplomatic efforts of Iran in Iraq and among the Arabs.

Iranian educational and academic institutions that host students from Islamic countries, especially Iraq, play a significant role in this regard; every year, Iraqi students from Arab, Kurdish, or other minority descents enter Iran to pursue their education. In addition to universities and academic institutions, religious institutions also admit many religious scholars and seminary students. The majority of the students of the Al-Mustafa International University come from Shi'i neighboring countries, especially Iraq (Ahmadi & Mousavi, 2010, p. 12). The largest proportion of students at the Ahlul Bayt International University are also from Iraq, making up nearly 20% of the student population (Ahmadi, 2011, pp. 171-172).

#### ***Cultural Diplomacy through Embassies and Friendship Organizations***

From a soft power point of view and taking a cultural diplomacy approach, the Islamic Republic of Iran exerts its cultural influence via its embassy in Baghdad and its consulates in Basra, Karbala, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah (Eisenstadt et al., 2011, p. 3). The Iran-Iraq Friendship Organization is a non-governmental non-profit grassroots organization. The celebrations, parties, and various events that are held by the friendship organization can help build a positive image

of Iran and make sure the news on the Islamic Republic of Iran does not fade away in international media (Jafari & Nick Ravesh, 2015). These ceremonies promote cultural influence at its maximum and even more powerfully than hard power framed as a simple and peaceful message.

#### ***Cultural Diplomacy through Media***

A few institutions are in charge of Iranian cultural diplomacy, but the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is the main one. Western sources have admitted that Iran has not focused on the Shi'i-Sunni division in the country in its media diplomacy, whether through visual or auditory means (Torfeh, 2016, p. 3). The content of the messages Iranian media outlets sent to Iraq shows Iran's search for unity in the divided neighbor society and it hope to realize the advantages it was seeking to gain from influencing Iraq this way. Consequently, Iran has captured the hearts and minds of Iraqis through its Arabic news and entertainment programming on the al-Alam channel (Eisenstadt, 2015, pp. 3-4). After 2011, al-Alam's focus on the events in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria has been to the advantage of their legal governments. Iraqi channels also work under the umbrella of Iranian media diplomacy; the most important of which are al-Najah and al-Qadir. Yet the most popular non-Iranian media outlet that exists on the map of Iranian media diplomacy is al-Mayadin, headquartered in Beirut. Analyzing the content of this news agency shows an attempt to create unity in Iraq (Rahmani & Shams Abadi, 2019, p. 87). These channels are key in attracting different groups in the Iraqi society to Iranian cultural diplomacy due to the moral compliance of Iranian-produced programs with the religious society of Iraq.

### ***Cultural Diplomacy through Religion***

In the religious sphere, too, Iranian cultural diplomacy has been playing a particular role in Iraq. For example, the Qom seminary is particularly important among Shi'i seminaries. This seminary has had a significant role in conservation of and promotion of Islam across the world by training high-level clerics and figures (Kamali Sarpoli, 2009, p. 68). The connections and exchanges between the Qom and Najaf seminaries were strengthened after 2003, which can set up the stage for greater Iranian influence in Iraq (Vaezi, 2008, p. 42). Iraqi Shi'is are mostly residents of southern Iraq and from an Iranian perspective, the history, religion, and culture of southern Iraq is directly within Iran's sphere of influence (Abedin, 2000, pp. 1-5). The existence of cities with majority Shi'i populations has given Iran the advantage to carry out the Islamic and Shi'i plans it intends, pursue the goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and use the situation to actualize the values of the Islamic Republic (Deukmejian, 1998, p. 114).

### ***Iranian Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq based on the Axis of Resistance Approach***

The U.S. military action against Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein who was hostile to Shi'is more than anyone was a turning point in the political presence of Shi'is on the stage of the Middle East. The entrance of Iraqi Shi'is to the Middle Eastern political space has led to the emergence of a new political model for Iranian Shi'is. The coming to power of Shi'is in Iraq and the 33 Day War between the Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel that turned Hezbollah into an important and influential regional player have in turn helped in strengthening the role and influence of Iran in developments of the Middle East. These events led some political leaders in the region

to become concerned about the increasing role and authority of Shi'is, especially Iran, and use the term "the Shia crescent" to express their concern (Zarqami et al., 2014, p. 198). Meanwhile, Iran's support for Shi'i militias in various countries, particularly Iraq, has allowed it to exert much power and influence over these countries. It can be argued that one of the most important axes of Iranian cultural diplomacy in the Middle East is the culture and literature of resistance under the umbrella of the axis of resistance. The setting for this type of action had come to be long before ISIS came about; ISIS was only an opportunity to operationalize and introduce Hashd al-Sha'bi forces as a continued front in the axis of resistance. The cultural diplomacy of the axis of resistance in Iraq was shaped with one specific goal in mind: as a result of the appearance of ISIS and the threat to Shi'i cultural and religious sites in Iraq, initially dispersed and later organized groups claimed the role of protector for Iraq and holy Shi'i sites against ISIS; they came to be known under the official title of Hashd al-Sha'bi, they train under the Qods force of IRGC (Duman, 2015, pp. 7-8). The Hashd al-Sha'bi are extremely dependent on the ideas and ideals of the Islamic Revolution, the guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Velayat-e-Faqih), and Islamic governance. This force is the most important intelligent cultural weight in Iran's cultural diplomacy in Iraq, whether it be through soft or hard means (Coles & Lucey, Jan 6, 2020). In the following section we discuss Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq.

### **TURKISH CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN IRAQ**

Just like Iranian cultural diplomacy, Turkey has used cultural diplomacy to exert an influence on Iraq. The most important aspects

of Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq are discussed below.

### **Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq with a Neo-Ottomanist Approach**

Neo-Ottomanism is the idea and policy of wanting to revive the greatness, glory, and power of the Ottoman Empire during its peak time. It is a mix of Hanafi Islam framed through the historical and cultural lens of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish ethnic identity; together, these elements seek to promote Turkey's status in all relevant aspects. Neo-Ottomanism points to a return to the past and years of Ottoman rule over countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt. Accordingly, Turkey is looking to enjoy a worthier status in the Islamic world (Omidi & Rezaei, 2011, p. 232). Turkey looking down upon countries who were created by dissociating from the Ottoman Empire, like Iraq, has led it to seek extensive economic and political relations with these countries in light of neo-Ottomanism and expand these relations in the cultural framework to revive the Ottoman glory (Ari, 2019, p. 5).

Within the framework of Turkish cultural diplomacy, governmental and non-governmental organizations pursue the policies for this type of diplomacy with a neo-Ottomanist and Turkish nationalist approach through a wide range of means including seminars, publications, satellite channels, movies, TV shows and TV programs, language education, etc.:

1- KABIL – Yunis Emre – The element of language (cultural center): Introduction to Turkish, paving the cultural road, responsible for creating conversations, generating ideas in the field of Turkish studies.

2- TIKKA – The execute element (cooperation and coordination agency): Cultural

renovation, renovating and reviving buildings and schools, employment, charity, road building and technical development (cultural pragmatism).

3- TRT – The advertisement element (the Anatolia agency): Full-time connection with the target society to reflect the news, media diplomacy, creating opinions, creating the future, shaping the mainstream, advert intelligence war, TV making, reshaping the public opinion, activism for women and children.

4- KDK – The attraction element (human rights institutions): Student activism, attracting the attention of the diaspora community and fans abroad.

5- The religious affairs organization – The governmental element: Religious activities and training Hanafi clerics based on government instructions, getting close with religious institutions in Muslim countries (official activities).

These tools are used to solve the problem of communication and being influential on regional public opinion as well as improving the image of this country for the citizens of the region (Enayati et al., 2005, pp. 83-84).

### **Cultural Diplomacy through Media: The Influence of Turkish Movies and TV Shows in Iraq**

This type of soft influence is extremely important due to its power of popularity, easy access, and mass nature, and is Turkey's most important pillar of cultural diplomacy with a neo-Ottomanist approach. Some statistics claim that 74 percent of people in sixteen Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, have followed through at least one Turkish drama and many of them know the names of at least some Turkish actors (Euronews, May 29, 2012: <https://per.euronews.com>). According to the CEO of the international agency Izzen Pinto,

Turkey is the second largest exporter of TV shows after Hollywood. Due to the increasing interest in Turkish movies and TV, millions of Arabs have chosen Istanbul and other areas in Turkey to spend the vacation and buy products. The influence of Turkish movies and TV is also great on the Kurd region of Iraq. The two channels of Kurdmax and Net TV are among the most important Kurdish channels in the autonomous region who present Turkish films dubbed and in high quality (BBC, June 6, 2020: [www.bbc.com/persian/arts](http://www.bbc.com/persian/arts)).

#### **Cultural Diplomacy through Education: Teaching and Learning of the Turkish Language in Iraq**

One of the main components of Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq is promotion and spread of the Turkish language. In this regard, we can point to the various activities of the Turkish embassy in Baghdad, the Turkish cooperation and coordination agency (TIKA), or the Yunis Emre Foundation in building schools and universities and promoting education (The Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, 2009, [fr.paris.icro.ir/15678](http://fr.paris.icro.ir/15678)). Within this framework, establishment of Turkish schools in the Kurdish section of Iraq has a relatively long history; perhaps the boldest example is the founding of the Aşk (love) schools in the autonomous Kurdistan region in 2008, where they are run by Turkish administrators and teachers. A university of the same name was also founded in Sulaymaniyah (The Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, Esfand 25, 1398: [fr.paris.icro.ir/15678](http://fr.paris.icro.ir/15678)). The Turkish Maarif Foundation is active in Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region, by running a private school at levels of pre-elementary, elementary, middle, and high school with a capacity of 1500 (Anadolu Agency, July 17, 2018: [www.aa.com.tr/fa/1349297](http://www.aa.com.tr/fa/1349297)).

#### **Cultural Diplomacy through Religion: Closeness with the Sunnis in Iraq**

Turkey has attempted to claim the status of a Sunni authority through cultural-religious diplomacy and create a closer relationship with Iraqi Sunnis by rebuilding and renovating their holy sites. In this regard, Turkey is trying to exert influence on the religious beliefs of Iraqi people, especially Sunnis, and gain their attention through various acts. At the same time, Turkey uses Iraqis' religious beliefs and the deep religious divide in the country to its advantage in policies of cultural diplomacy. Attempting to be closer with the Kurds, especially the mainstream in the autonomous region (i.e., the Barzanis), extending relations with Iraqi Sunnis, and supporting the Ayad Allawi, a secular candidate sympathetic to Sunnis, in the 2011 election are among Turkish activities that have been carried out under the umbrella of neo-Ottomanist cultural diplomacy to renew their allegiance with this part of the Iraqi society (Tremblay, 2014, p. 3).

#### **Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq with a Turkish Nationalist Approach**

A leverage available to Turkey is presence of Turkmens in the cities of Kirkuk and Erbil, and the surrounding areas. Turkmens are Iraqis from Turkish descent who are loyal to their Turkish heritage and identity (Triana, 2017, p. 118). Most Iraqi Turkmens are descendants of Ottoman soldiers, traders, and government workers who came down to Iraq from Anatolia during the Ottoman Empire (Jawahir, 2010, p. 313). Findings show that Turkey has been successful in this path. For example, the Turkmen front in Northern Iraq that is supported by Turkey has turned into the envoy for the Justice and Development Party of Turkey and cooperates with or protests the programs and policies of the central

Iraqi government or the autonomous Kurdistan government in line with Turkish interests. Accordingly, Turkey has been trying to shift Iraqi public opinion and collective action, especially when it comes to Kurds and Turkmens, to its own advantage by emphasizing and empowering the identity factors among Iraqi Kurds and Turkmens based on the neo-Ottomanist discourse and through means of media, education, support, etc. Now after a survey of Iranian and Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq, the setting is appropriate for a comparison.

### COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN AND TURKISH CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN IRAQ

Although there was little room to analyze the details in different areas of Iranian and Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq, it is the details that are at the root of the difference between the two countries cultural approach towards Iraq. A compare and contrast of these approaches is carried out in this section.

#### Differences in Iranian and Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq

It can be concluded from the discussion that the basis of two countries' cultural diplomacy in Iraq are different. These differences are explained below:

##### *Iranian Religious Approach vs. Turkish Secularism*

Iran's religious approach to Iraq became doubly important particularly after 2003. From a religious point of view, a large part of Iranian Shi'i identity is linked to Iraq, and Shi'ism as the official and historical religion of the majority of Iranian people is not definable without Najaf and Karbala. The continued presence of Iranian clerics in the Najaf seminary and their role in the estab-

lishment of Shi'i seminaries in Iraq cannot be denied. The Shi'is' access to power in Iraq can not only change the ominous and distrustful atmosphere that has controlled the two countries' relations in the past, but also expand the capacity for cooperation to achieve shared advantages. Many of Iraqi people desire a stable and peaceful relationship with Iran; from the Shi'is point of view, their religious interest in the priority and peace would allow them to travel for pilgrimage to Mashhad and Qom (Javadi Arjomand et al., 2012, p. 183). The situation is mirrored among Iranians; pilgrimage to Karbala has turned into a symbolic issue in the Islamic world. Therefore, Iran has always supported Iraqi Shi'is, fighting American imperialism with their help and empowering the axis of resistance. In fact, the most important factor the Islamic Republic of Iran could use as its main advantage in Iraq compared to Turkey is the geopolitics of Shi'ism and its deep influence on Iraqi Shi'is (Cetinsaya, 2017, p. 162).

On the other hand, based on the neo-Ottomanist doctrine, the Turkish foreign policy cannot be in contrast with its historical background and the secular and west-leaning policy. Therefore, Turkey's cultural approach in Iraq is not religious, but promoting secular teachings; although, due to its competition with Iran, it does support Sunni groups to some extent as a response to Iran's support for the Shi'is. The Turkish government presented a secular and nationalist nature for its foreign policy by emphasizing nationalism and secularism, compiling a constitution based on Western criteria, and selecting the English language. The upper hand of the development-minded stream in Turkish domestic and foreign policy points to the secular ontology of this country's policy-makers (Azimzadeh Ardebili et al.,

2017, p. 104). As a result, Turkey's diplomacy in the cultural sphere attempts to promote secularism in different ways, this is considered one of the attractions of Turkey.

#### ***The Iranian Interactive Approach vs. The Turkish Top-down Approach***

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Iran-Iraq interactive approach turned from confrontation to positive cooperation. The interaction of the two, especially after the Shi'is accessed power, became constructive and provided the appropriate setting for Iranian diplomatic policy-making on a national and regional level. At the national level, the Shi'is position in power allowed for greater cooperation in cultural, economic, and political-security aspects. At the regional level, the strengthening of the Shi'i element in Iraq has been the most important factor in leveling out Iran-Iraq relations. Existence of shared religious principles and common historical-cultural roots are among factors that have facilitated the Iran-Iraq cooperation (Sadeghi et al., 2016, p. 146).

On the other hand, based on the neo-Ottomanist doctrine that Turkey pursues as the inheritor of the Ottoman Empire, it must take on a leadership role in the processes and developments in the Middle East. As a result, we witness a kind of top-down approach in Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish foreign policy in Iraq is, therefore, shaped by the model that advocates for maximum Turkish involvement to ensure stability and safety for Iraq. Since the Kurdish identity is considered tension-inducing in domestic affairs of Turkey, the country's political approach towards Iraq has been focused on reducing tensions with neighbors, strategically deepening the cooperation policy with the autonomous Kurdistan government, supporting Sunni movements, and

dialoguing with the central government (Azimzadeh Ardebili et al., 2017, p. 117). The trend of developments in Turkey and actions took by its government in Iraq show that the top-down outlook on the region leads to an opportunistic, benefit-oriented, and highly pragmatic approach, so much so that Turkey has even assisted ISIS in line of its interests in Iraq.

#### ***The Iranian Altruistic Approach vs. The Turkish Self-interested Approach***

Iranian public diplomacy in Iraq is based on maintaining the status quo and supporting the existing governments. In contrast, Turkish diplomacy is focused on changing the status quo. Accordingly, the two countries of Iran and Iraq see each other as neighbors who walk in the same path and pursue the same interests while Turkey looks at its southern neighbors in a confrontational and oppositional. Iran sees itself as an ally of Iraq, and even plays a mediating role to some extent, but Turkey is looking for regional hegemony and leadership, which is why they use disruptive public diplomacy to reshape the structure and attitude in Iraq and access more benefits. In contrast, Iran uses diplomacy to consolidate the domestic circumstances and maintain the status quo in various areas (Athari et al., 2014, p. 164).

Overall, it can be said that in addition to accepting many Iraqi refugees during the 8-year war and afterwards, Iran has provided much economic aid for rebuilding Iraq and helping the impoverished population after the Iraq-U.S. war and has made a special contribution to reconstruction of the holy Shi'i sites as well. The commission for reconstruction of the holy Shi'i sites has provided services like creating medical centers in addition to renovating the holy sites (Javadi Arjomand & Amirzadeh, 2013, p.

162). Another major assistance provided to Iraq by Iran was regarding the fight with ISIS. During the premiership of Haidar al-Abadi, Iran's relationship with the Iraqi government was strengthened due to the political, military, and intelligence help Iran provided to Iraq in order to defeat ISIS and liberate Iraqi cities from the hands of this terrorist group who had occupied a massive section of the Iraqi land. The role that Iran played in protecting Iraq's territorial integrity during the Kurdish separationist uprising not only strengthened the political force of an Iranian ally in the political stage of the country, but also turned Iran into a strategic and reliable ally for the government in Baghdad (Mennati & Haadian, 2019, p. 149). This is while many believe that Turkey has supported ISIS in many instances or at least been inactive against it due its self-interested and benefit-oriented approach (Ghasemi, 2016, p. 107).

#### ***Iran's Historical Bonds with Iraq vs. Turkish Nationalism***

In an Iranians' approach to Iraq, it was determined that the two countries cultural and historical interactions have a long history. In no country is the trace of Iranian culture and civilization, whether from the pre-Islamic period or the Islamic era, as evident as it is across Iraq (Parsapour, 2009, p. 3). Having a common historical background and shared cultural attributes increases the Iraqis openness to the Iranian influence and will. On the other hand, Turkey claims Iraq had been under Ottoman rule at the time of the Ottoman Empire and attempts to gain control over the region through its neo-Ottomanist and nationalist approaches; nonetheless, Turkey pursues this policy by the means of cultural diplomacy and not hard power. One of these methods is Turkish language educa-

tion in Iraq and another one is paying particular attention to Iraqi Turkmens who claim to be from Turkish descent and are somehow descendants of Turks in Iraq; therefore, protecting the rights of Iraqi Turkmens has been at the core of Turkish policies in Iraq (Heidari & Rahnavard, 2011, p. 84). Experts have claimed that Turkish nationalism has led to skepticism in Arabs and somehow stands in opposition with Arab and Kurdish nationalism.

In addition to the differences in Iranian and Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq that result from the political, historical, and ideological structures of the two countries, there are similarities in the cultural diplomacy choices of the two driven from application of similar tools to exert a cultural influence on Iraq. Although the tools are similar, their effectiveness of Iraqi citizens is not the same. The section below attempts to discuss the various tools and their effectiveness.

#### **The Similarities of Iranian and Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq**

Both Iran and Turkey use similar tools to advance their cultural diplomacy including exploitation of the media, organizational activity by Iran and Turkey in Iraq, academic and educational approaches, and language promotion.

#### ***Iranian and Turkish Media Diplomacy in Iraq***

The fall of the dictatorship in Iraq allowed regional powers like Iran and Turkey to use the relatively open media atmosphere created as a result to attract public opinion. Yet there are differences in the policies of each country regarding use of media:

#### ***Iranian Media Diplomacy in Iraq***

Pursuing its mission of "exporting the revolution", Iran has always paid a considerable

amount of attention to “taking over a nation’s heart”; hence media diplomacy has been quite important for Iran’s policies in Iraq. Newspapers are one of the mediums used for this purpose. Although newspapers have a long history in Iran, the number of Iranian newspapers does not measure up to other countries in the region. Among Iranian newspapers, only *al-Vafagh* is published in Arabic. The low circulation number of this paper along with the shift of attention of the audience to the new generation of media has led to the relative anonymity of this paper in Iraq. In short, newspapers do not have a noteworthy place in Iranian media diplomacy in Iraq.

Radio is another medium. Investment on radio broadcasting outside the borders has not been significant since after of the Islamic revolution. Up to 2016, there have only been a few radio programs in Arabic broadcasted by the Islamic Republic, the most important of which are perhaps Radio Payam and Radio Salam, this radio has focused on promoting the pure Islamist culture through its programs (Rahmani & Shams Abadi, 2018, p. 86).

TV channels are another medium that can be used. In the 25 years between 1991 and 2016, Iran has increased the number of its television channels to 25, some of which broadcast Arabic programs. Overall, like Turkey, Iran has mainly invested on TV among the available media options. The first Iranian Arabic-language channel broadcasting abroad was Sahar, which launched in the first few years after the Islamic revolution with 90 minutes programming per day. This channel was renamed as al-Kowsar and turned into an independent satellite channel in 2005 and began 24-hour programming in 2010. A major focus on this channel is expanding and strengthening of Shi’i intellec-

tual principles and bringing Shi’i Arabs closer to the Islamic Republic regime (Torfeh, 2016, p. 3). Al-Alam is the other important channel; some experts even claim it to be the most effective Iranian international channel. Al-Alam launched in 2003 and set up offices in Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Tehran. An analysis of the content of this channel points to an emphasis on news. The messages broadcasted by this channel are mainly about confronting the U.S. and unifying Iraq. Other news channels like al-Menar (run by the media sector of the Lebanese Hezbollah), al-Mayadin (headquartered in Beirut), and others also work on the Iranian diplomatic front. Iran has also started entertainment channels like I Film that dubs mostly historic or religious Iranian TV shows into Arabic and broadcasts them in the region (Rahmani & Shams Abadi, 2018, pp. 86-88).

A disadvantage of the Iranian media is that the government has too much control over it, which leads to the undermining of the audience’s will in the messages they send. At the same time, abiding by moral principles and refusing to attract audiences by using sexual attractions has been a fixed Iranian media policy in Iraq. Iran does not focus on the Shi’i-Sunni divide in Iraq in its media diplomacy in the country; it has rather been seeking unification of the different sections of the neighbor society (Torfeh, 2016, p. 3).

#### *Turkish Media Diplomacy in Iraq*

At the same time Turkey was trying to join the European Union, they allowed for greater media freedom, and therefore the quantity and quality of their media increased, many of these media are non-governmental. Overall, there are 2459 newspapers published in Turkey, 23 of which are published on a regional level and 55 of which are published on an

international level. These non-domestic papers are mostly published in Arabic and Kurdish, hence opening a path to influence the Iraqi society. Moreover, Turkey started 1087 radio stations between 1926 and 2017, with 31 national, 100 regional, and 951 local stations. An analysis of the content of the Turkish radio programs shows that in addition to news, the programs focus on entertainment aspects of media diplomacy, especially music.

For Turkey, television is more important than other media. To capture the minds and

hearts of Iraqi people, too, Turkey has focused on the entertainment aspect of media diplomacy instead of news; accordingly, it has broadcasted TV shows with romantic content that will attract the youth. This does not translate to Turkey's neglect of the news aspect of diplomacy; a major part of Turkish news coverage in Iraq has an anti-Kurdish and anti-Shi'i tone to it (Rahmani & Shams Abadi, 2018, pp. 81-85). Table 1 compares and contrasts media diplomacy of the two countries of Iran and Turkey in Iraq.

**Table 1: Comparing and contrasting Iran and Turkey's media diplomacy in Iraq**

Similarities	Differences	
	Iran	Turkey
Setting up radio and TV channels in Arabic and Kurdish	Focus on news coverage	Focus on entertainment programs
Dubbing produced TV shows in Arabic	Offering unifying content	Offering dividing content
Focus on visual media (TV)	Historical and religious TV shows	Modern and romantic TV shows
	Broadcast from Iranian or Iranian-supported channels	Broadcast from channels supported by Arab countries
	Aiming to shift people's political perspective	Aiming to shift people's lifestyle
	Opposing the U.S. and Saudi Arabia	Neutral about the U.S. and Saudi Arabia

#### *Academic and Educational Approaches*

Another similarity of Iranian and Turkish cultural diplomacy in Iraq is using academic and educational means to influence the body of the Iraqi society. Overall, this aspect of cultural diplomacy includes citizen exchange programs for educational, research, cultural, academic, artistic, sports, and language learning opportunities, building schools and academic establishments in the target country, attracting students, creating scholarships, and more (Sajjadpour & Vahidi, 2011, p. 84).

In the academic and educational aspect, Iran has attracted many students from other

countries, especially Iraq, by founding universities and academic-religious centers within and outside the country including the al-Mustafa International University, the Ahlul Bayt International University, and the University of Religions and Denominations. For example, the majority of students at the al-Mustafa International University are from neighbor countries with a Shi'i population, especially Iraq (Rafi' & Nike Ravesh, 2013, p. 114). Yet Turkey has been more active in this regard compared to Iran and has taken on more supportive actions, especially in building schools, universities,

and academic institutions and giving academic bursaries and scholarships to Iraqis.

### ***Attempt to Promote the Countries' Official Languages in Iraq***

Another similarity in Iran and Turkey's cultural diplomacy approach is paying attention to promotion of their official language in Iraq. Both countries have taken steps in this regard.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been investing on attracting the bold minds of the Islamic world and shape their thoughts to its own advantage for a long time since after the revolution. For instance, in terms of academic exchanges, many students from various Islamic countries are admitted to Iranian institutions. These students are first taught Farsi in a 6-month to a year-long course. A great number of Iraqis come to Iran for this purpose (Derakhsheh & Ghaffari, 2011, p. 25). Other elements like seminaries also play a role in promoting the Persian language in Iraq. Turkey has also used exerting influence through Turkish language and literature as part of its cultural diplomatic efforts. Turkey admits many students to its universities every year and promotes the Turkish language among them through various services. What places Turkey in a better position compared to Iran when it comes to Iraq is creating language schools and institutions for teaching the Turkish language; many Iraqi students enroll and study in these schools because they have better facilities than Iraqi schools. Furthermore, the popularity of Turkish dramas in Iraq is so much that many people have become interested in learning Turkish phrases and the language overall.

### ***Shared Concern and Sensitivity regarding the Kurds***

The Kurdish national movement includes some powerful elements on the large scale.

One of these elements is that Kurdistan is part of the nation-states of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The creation of the Kurdish separationist identity in whichever part of Kurdistan is a threat to the territorial integrity of all neighboring countries (Zibakalam & Abdollahpour, 2011, p. 71). Since Iran, Turkey, and Syria have Kurdish minorities, they are against establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state because they are worried about how it would influence the Kurdish minority within their borders. Similarly, to prevent the separationist ideology from entering their Kurd region, these countries have always emphasized the importance of Iraq land integrity and stood by this position together (Mehripour, 2002, p. 57). Overall, there are many similarities in the cultural diplomatic approaches Iran and Turkey have taken in Iraq, and this is a result of using similar tools; yet, as discussed above, how these tools are used is different.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the past few decades during which soft power has become more important and prevalent than hard power, politics of ideas has risen above politics of power, and the role of non-governmental groups has become more noteworthy in international relations has led countries to turn to public and cultural diplomacy in their foreign policy. This is made possible through charm and soft power. Iran and Turkey are among countries who have had a great need for cultural diplomacy in Middle East to gain influence in the countries of the region. Iraq is one of the countries that has created some competition between Iran and Turkey in terms of exerting their influence on it. The two countries have used various media, academic-educational, and religious tools for this purpose. A comparative analysis of Iranian

and Turkish cultural diplomacy finds that the two countries are more similar in terms of their executive pattern, which is based on their tools, than their structural pattern. The secular nature of Turkish politics in addition to the deideologization of Turkish foreign politics as well as racial, linguistic, and ethnic bonds of parts of Iraq with Turkey are some of the elements of Turkey's success in applying its cultural diplomacy to exert influence. Turkey's relatively better economic position compared to Iran is a good complement for stronger cultural diplomacy in Iraq. Founding numerous universities, giving out academic scholarships, establishing religious schools, and even setting up stores that promote Turkish products point to the fact that Turkey's economic status accompanies the cultural variables in this effort. Iran, on the other hand, shares cultural, historical, and religious interests with Iraq and has a special place in this country; yet weak management, Iran's undermining of cultural diplomacy, and too many hands in the game have led to dispersion of resources and a weak performance, especially since Iran has focused on Shi'ism and empowering the axis of resistance, which is incompatible with all individuals, groups, and institutions in the Iraqi society and has at times even created sensations against Iran. While Turkey has a lower capacity and fewer cultural tools compared to Iran, it has proved more successful due to its pragmatism, opportunism, and benefit-oriented approach. Even though Turkey does not have many opportunities for cultural activity in Iraq, it has pursued a planned, comprehensive, and active cultural diplomacy. Overall, it can be said that alt-

hough Iran might be closer to Iraq in terms of its goals, the means used by Turkey are stronger and much more effective. Finally, we suggest the following steps to be implemented if a more effective cultural diplomacy in Iraq is to be pursued by Iran:

- Determining shared, understandable principles and concepts about policies and approaches,
- Creating a public diplomacy think tank at the highest level in Iran,
- Reducing the number of institutions in charge of cultural diplomacy and its coordination,
- Training expert human resources in the field of cultural diplomacy knowledgeable in management, communications, and international relations,
- Dedicating resources based on performance evaluation,
- Using the Iranian diaspora capacity to strengthen "people to people" exchanges,
- Attracting students from target countries to study in Iran and dedicating bursaries and scholarships for Persian language and literature and Iranian studies majors,
- Planning to expand touristic exchanges between Iran and the target countries,
- Showing commitment to execution of international agreements.

May we witness the carry out of a more active and effective approach in cultural diplomacy by the Islamic Republic, whether it be in Iraq or elsewhere, in light of the officials' understanding of the sensitive circumstances at present.

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